

# SYNTACTIC AMBIGUITY AND THE TEACHING OF WRITTEN ENGLISH TO ADVANCED POLISH LEARNERS

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Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man.

(Francis Bacon)

## I. STATING THE PROBLEM

1. Definition and approach. The term 'ambiguity' with reference to natural languages can be generally defined as 'the property of sentences that they may be interpreted in more than one way and that insufficient clues are available for the intended or the optimal interpretation' (Kooij 1971: 1). The two parts of this definition clearly correspond to the two aspects of the problem: ambiguity in a natural language can be considered either an inherent property of the system or a shortcoming of language users. Taken in this first sense, ambiguity occupies a legitimate position in theoretical considerations concerning linguistic description. For example, it has become the subject of ample discussion, providing an argument for the superiority of transformational approach over Phrase Structure Grammars: certain types of ambiguous sentences whose interpretation shows that the principle of linear constituent-structure is inadequate as a means of linguistic description, are adequately explained in the framework of TG. Such a theoretical approach, i.e. the consideration of ambiguity in respect of its consequences for a linguistic description, involves several methodological assumptions. Thus, communicative (or pragmatic) aspects, such as, for instance, the effects of ambiguity on the recipients or the sender's intentions are left out of consideration and the context, if considered, is usually restricted to what is at present moment generally taken to be the maxi-

imum unit of linguistic description, i.e. the sentence (irrespective of which of the many definitions of this concept a given author might wish to accept). Consequently, what is considered is *potential* ambiguity, and the purpose of the investigation is to indicate 'the conditions under which a sentence is *potentially* ambiguous insofar as its grammatical structure is involved' (Kooij 1971: 115).

The obvious validity of such an approach for the development of linguistic investigation can hardly be questioned. Yet it proves at a closer inspection that ambiguity is such a pervasive characteristic of natural languages that there is 'no way in which words can be selected and constructed into sentences that will automatically assure a single unambiguous meaning' (Gleason 1965: 461). On the other hand, however, in most cases certain features of the linguistic and extralinguistic context of a sentence (some of them already subjects of investigation, others as yet completely unknown) make one meaning prevail so decidedly over others that the ambiguity is practically resolved and successful communication ensured. Therefore, though it is an inherent property of a natural language, ambiguity should not be valued too highly as an actual obstacle in the communication process.

But still, everyday contact with language, especially in the written medium (we shall discuss this point at some length further in this paper), provides at least some evidence that the consequence of various types of ambiguity for successful communication is not an altogether negligible question. Moreover, ambiguity is not always necessarily regarded as a deficiency of language use. A recognized artistic device, one of the basic tools of a true poet, it is believed to enrich the text and its possible interpretations. Simultaneous presence of alternative meanings in an utterance is the chief source of paranomasia — one of the resources of creative writing. This type of ambiguity differs from potential ambiguity discussed above — it is *actually* effective in a given message, either in positive or non-positive sense. Here, investigation will clearly require a different method. Pragmatics being the chief concern, one would only consider those cases in which features of the context actually fail to provide adequate clues for a univocal interpretation. In consequence, the investigation of the context (broad or narrow, as the need might be) would provide most crucial information and the supra-sentence level will necessarily become the natural level of analysis. Even though the linguistic unit to which the discussion of a given case will be ultimately reduced might prove to constitute a single sentence, discourse analysis will serve to single this unit out. As opposed to the case of theoretical approach, the purpose of investigation will be to find out the function of ambiguity in the process of language communication, i.e. to answer the question whether a sentence that is *potentially* ambiguous does or does not *actually* have a multiple meaning for a language user in a given context. Thus it becomes a question of stylistics, in the sense that it 'concerns all these relations among linguistic entities which are statable, or may be statable, in

terms of wider spans than those which fall within the units of the sentence (Hill 1958: 406).

Such a practical approach implies going back to old considerations of ambiguity in a pragmatic context, either as a source of fallacious reasoning in logic or as a fault of rhetoric (for a detailed discussion, see Kooij 1971: 1ff), or else — in the positive sense — as a characteristic of a true literary achievement. In the non-positive sense ('insufficient clues that are available for the *intended* or the *optimal* interpretation', to quote again the second part of our definition) it will be also the approach of a language teacher.

Before we develop this point any further, however, it might be useful to consider the possible ways in which ambiguity in a natural language is manifested.

2. Types of ambiguity in natural languages. From the linguistic point of view, ambiguity is traditionally divided into two types: lexical and grammatical. Lexical ambiguity (which most writers carefully restrict to that present within what is actually said, as different from what is only implied by the sender or the recipient of the message) concerns those cases in which a syntactically unambiguous sentence becomes semantically ambiguous, due to the presence in it of at least one lexical item which has more than one sense, cf.

He enjoys wearing a *light* suit in the summer (Quoted in Katz, Postal 1964: 15).

This last concept has been causing serious trouble, since preserving a precise distinction between homonymy and polysemy on the one hand and mere vagueness or generality — a rule rather than an exception in natural languages — on the other, proved extremely difficult. Also, more than with other types of ambiguity, finding reasons for the impossibility of unanimous interpretation in such cases seems to belong to the domain of philosophical rather than purely linguistic investigation. Possible explanations would be of inter-semiotic nature, more directly concerning the problem of substantive universals, and they might suffer rather than gain from any attempts to reduce the problem down to the scope of a chosen single language or to a contrastive analysis of a pair of languages only.

It is for such reasons that lexical ambiguity has not been amply discussed in theoretical works on the subject and that authors of language textbooks do not consider it a significant teaching problem.

To grammatical ambiguity, on the other hand, both theoreticians of language and applied linguists have paid much more attention. Structuralists considered it to be chiefly the result of difference of constituent structure (cf. the classical example 'Old men and women'); after the concept of a non-linear constituent-structure has been developed, also the consequence of multiple

distributional classification of elements for grammatical ambiguity were recognized (cf., also classical 'They can fish' Lyons 1969: 212). The development of Generative Transformational Grammars accounts for the explanation of grammatical ambiguity as a possible result of transformational derivation of a given surface structure (cf. another classic, 'Flying planes can be dangerous'). Further in this paper, I use the term *syntactic ambiguity*, as all types of grammatical ambiguity are a property of syntax. A more detailed discussion of these, as well as of the problem of interrelations between syntactic ambiguity and semantics, will be presented in further sections of this paper.

Most of the theoretical discussions of syntactic ambiguity have so far served the purposes of linguistic description, and as such they concerned the theory of linguistic competence rather than performance. Chomsky, for example, did not seem to consider any possibility of its practical significance for language users: 'In bringing to consciousness the triple ambiguity... we present no new information to the hearer and teach him nothing new about his language but simply arrange matters in such a way that his linguistic intuition, previously observed, becomes evident to him' (Chomsky 1965: 22). In discussing cases of ambiguity, the type/token differentiation (i.e. abstraction from unique cases of language use) is usually carefully observed and — though the fact that many ambiguities go unnoticed is generally recognized — the main factor of disambiguation is considered to be the linguistic context.

This position seems no longer tenable when it comes to the consideration of any linguistic phenomenon in the context of communication process (one of such considerations being clearly the foreign-language teaching situation). The recognition of this is found even in some of those works which are otherwise mainly theory-orientated. In this respect, Lyons' claim that sentences that are grammatically ambiguous can be semantically non-ambiguous, chiefly for pragmatic reasons, is of great importance (Lyons 1969: 214).

Recognition of the function of prosodic features in disambiguation of sentences can be considered another step on the way towards bridging the gap between the theory of language and the theory of language use, or — in Chomsky's classical terms — competence and performance. A. Hill's 'phonological syntax' (1958), a detailed analysis of linguistic structures of American English, provides numerous examples of disambiguation by means of prosody. Like other writers, Hill admits that signals present in the sound system (such as pitch or junctures) are imperfectly represented in writing by punctuation marks. The obvious consequence is that ambiguity is more frequent in the written medium than in speech, the phenomenon that is due also to some well-known factors that are traditionally enumerated as differences between spoken and written language (for a discussion, see, e.g. Rainsbury 1967). Thus, any pragmatically-orientated discussion of syntactic ambiguity should carefully observe the differentiation between the written and spoken medium.

Before we discuss the problem of syntactic ambiguity in the context of foreign-language teaching, a short summary of the assumptions so far accepted may help to clarify our position. Thus ambiguity, an inherent property of any natural language, can be manifested, roughly, as multiplicity of meanings of single words or larger structures. It is the second type which is more naturally dealt with inside the framework of linguistic sciences. Further, linguistic ambiguity can be defined in terms of either language theory or language use. The consequence of this duality is the double possibility of approach, illustrated by means of the following diagram:

	Theoretical approach	Practical approach
1. Purpose of investigation	Contribution towards the theory of language	Contribution towards the theory of language use
2. Relation to context and situation	type-approach	token-approach
3. Level of analysis	sentence	supra-sentence
4. Level of linguistic representation of data	phonological	phonological and/or graphic

3. Syntactic ambiguity, contrastive analysis and the language teacher. The assumptions stated on the right side of the above table are more readily required in the context of foreign-language teaching. Further, it seems possible that — as in the case of other linguistic phenomena — the investigation of syntactic ambiguity could gain form a contrastive approach, though it is a common agreement that its first concern should be theoretical rather than pedagogical implications. Grammars are expected to provide formal explanations of idealized competences, i.e. 'each grammar represents a model of speaker and hearer of the language it seeks to explain' and an analysis of such idealized competences must constitute 'the very foundation of all applied studies in language teaching' (Di Pietro 1971: 21). However, there is as yet no grammatical description that would fulfil all requirements cited in the literature on TG (i.e. completeness, accuracy, explicitness and simplicity). While there have been some attempts at postulating larger units of discourse, it is still the sentence which remains the maximum workable unit. Linguistics has begun to describe the sentence generating rules of languages but has not yet told us much about context or the structure of the entire speech act. All this does not mean, however, that the applied linguist can well afford to wait till theoretical investigation provides the complete background for the development of a performance theory.

There seems to be no reason why the present findings of linguistic theory could not be used to work out some principles of practical application. Investigation directed towards such an end could provide both the necessary confirmation of the theory and some valuable insights that might promote its further development.

The starting point must be the assumption, now generally accepted, that the main purpose of language is communication. Consequently the purpose of all foreign-language teaching must be considered communication in the language taught, irrespective of the particular language skill that happens to be the focus of instruction. Among these skills, the skill of writing has perhaps been the subject of most heated discussion, as far as its place in instructional programs is concerned. The moot point of traditional (grammar-translation) method, in audiolingual teaching which emphasized the ability of understanding and producing utterances, it was left till the more advanced levels of teaching or was altogether underrated. As a result, some of these programs were duly criticized 'in their lack of concern to produce literate students of foreign languages who hold their own in reading or writing scientific or literary prose' (Di Pietro 1971: 165). Any full language course must state among its objectives that the students acquire some, however restricted, competence in the written medium of the language taught; some immediate consequences, relevant for the present discussion, can be summarized as follows:

1. the ability to recognize and appreciate variations of style, such as are involved in writing 'with an implicit purpose' (i.e. literature) must be developed,

2. the ability to write 'with an explicit purpose' (i.e. expository prose) must be taught.

In such a context, the relevance of the problem of syntactic ambiguity for teaching language becomes immediately apparent. Expository prose is in fact the only kind of writing used for university purposes, its goal being report, explanation and evaluation of facts. In this type of writing the basic requirement on the form, as different from contents, is that it is understood not in the process of laborious study but through simple reading. Even though — in spite of ambiguity — the correct interpretation in most cases ultimately proves possible, the reader becomes painfully aware of the writer's incompetence.

While lexical ambiguity is seemingly less relevant, ambiguity as a property of syntax will be legitimately viewed as a teaching problem of par excellence linguistic nature. Syntactic relationships being clearly meaningful, inadequate competence in manipulating linguistic elements or lack of awareness of potential meaning of linguistic structures can significantly lessen the effectiveness of communication. Mastery of written language is an important matter and we need to know much more about how to teach it than we do now. But, in order to be able to cure the disease, one must first investigate the symptoms.

In respect to ambiguity, learners' 'receptive competence' is usually larger than 'productive competence' (for further discussion of this distinction, see Di Pietro 1971: 20); ambiguity may exist only for the recipient of the message, since the person who formulated it presumably knew which of the possible meanings he intended to convey. Thus, though grammatically correct, a text

will be considered stylistically erroneous and the need for remedial procedures will become apparent. Yet, though similar to error analysis, investigation will not in general involve analysing sentences which are ungrammatical. As syntactic ambiguity is shown to belong among the problems of stylistic rather than among those of grammaticality, the concept of acceptability will often prove more useful. These distinctions will become clear after the sample analysis has been presented; at this point we would like to state the hypothesis that the reasons for actual syntactic ambiguity in written English of Polish students might be much the same as those for standard linguistic errors: interference and overgeneralization and such factors as memory retention or type of instruction. Therefore, it seems profitable to carry the analysis within the framework of a contrastive study. Such an analysis, apart from its possible predictive values, can provide hypothetical explanation of three kinds:

1. syntactic ambiguity can prove to be due to interference: disambiguating factors that exist in Polish might be shown to be absent from English. Transfer from Polish to English can result in ambiguity. Teaching stylistics will use such contrasts as its starting point,

2. syntactic ambiguity in Polish and English can prove to occur on the same level of derivational history of an utterance. With languages as similar as Polish and English this can often be the case: contrasting relevant linguistic structures will provide an index of features which are actually shared. Even so, contrastive analysis will still prove instructive: clarity of style will in such cases be taught as it is taught to native speakers (in native-language teaching syntactic ambiguity in expository prose is classified as an error of style and remedial procedures involve sets of normative rules, cf., e.g., Saloni 1971, ch. V),

3. the reason for syntactic ambiguity can prove to be a combination of the two factors listed above: some features accounting for ambiguity of a given utterance will be due to transfer, others will be a shared property of the two systems. Discrimination between the two will be of obvious value for the foreign-language teacher.

## II. AN INTRODUCTION TO SAMPLE ANALYSIS

As a verification of the validity of the approach postulated above for the investigation of syntactic ambiguity in written English of advanced Polish learners, I would like to present an informal analysis of an example which seems illustrative of the principles suggested. The following extract comes from a composition produced by a first year university student of English (i.e. after four years of learning the language):

(As George walked out of the school one early evening, he met his cousin Henry from Manchester.) (I)He<sub>1</sub> was very surprised to see him<sub>2</sub> because

he<sub>2</sub> thought he<sub>4</sub> was in Wales and in his<sub>5</sub> last letter he<sub>6</sub> had not written about his<sub>7</sub> journey to London.

The remaining part of the text is irrelevant for the present discussion. I propose that the analysis concentrate on the sentence I<sup>1</sup>. It is postulated that its surface realization can be reduced to the following seven sentences (the PRO forms correspond to consecutive occurrences of the [+Pron] forms in I. The integers in I. correspond to these in I.1 - I.7):

- I.1 SOMETHING (+S=I.2) surprised SOMEBODY<sub>1</sub> very much
- I.2 SOMEBODY<sub>1</sub> saw SOMEBODY<sub>2</sub>
- I.3 SOMEBODY<sub>3</sub> thought SOMETHING (+S=I.4)
- I.4 SOMEBODY<sub>4</sub> was in Wales
- I.5 SOMEBODY<sub>5</sub> wrote a letter
- I.6 SOMEBODY<sub>6</sub> wrote SOMETHING (+S=I.7)
- I.7 SOMEBODY<sub>7</sub> planned a journey to London<sup>2</sup>

In view of multiple pronominalization<sup>3</sup>, I. is syntactically many ways ambiguous. Yet, in the context of the previous sentence (quoted in brackets), it can be partially disambiguated, due to the information provided by syntactic and semantic projection rules of English. Thus, though all [+Pron] forms in I. 'comprise features like [+Animate, +Human, +Male and so on] but lack full semantic specification underlying Nouns' (Di Pietro 1971: 97), SOMEBODY<sub>1</sub> in I.1 and I.2 is identical with *George* through 'a semantic feature specification of the *name* element' (Di Pietro 1971: 97), being anaphoric to the referent mentioned in the bracketed sentence (cf. Gleason 1968: 57). Thus we get

- I.1a SOMETHING (+S=L.2) surprised George very much
- I.2a George saw SOMEBODY<sub>2</sub>

SOMEBODY<sub>2</sub> in I.2a is not identical with *George*, as sameness of reference would require reflexivization of the second NP:

- I.2b \*George saw George (if NP<sub>1</sub>=NP<sub>2</sub>)
- I.2c George saw himself (if NP<sub>1</sub>=NP<sub>2</sub>)

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of the present discussion, I follow the working definition of sentence quoted in Kooij (1971: 5): 'any sequence of linguistic elements to which at least one grammatical structure can be assigned and which has at least one meaning'.

<sup>2</sup> The ambiguity inherent in the expressions 'his letter' and 'his journey' is resolved by the context. The Genitive Determiner *his* is considered by the present author to be derived by pronominalizing the sentences 'Henry wrote a letter' and 'Henry planned a journey', with subsequent nominalization. (cf. Thomas 1965: 199). Though different from some analyses of genitival constructions (cf., e.g. Nagucka 1971), such an explanation seems more in accordance with the data discussed.

<sup>3</sup> In view of earlier assumptions, (Cf. Note 2), the categorial distinction between pronouns and genitives is not observed in the following discussion.

Hence, SOMEBODY<sub>2</sub> in I.2a must be identified as the second participant in the discourse (for definitions of terms, see Gleason 1968), i.e., *Henry*:

I.2d George saw Henry

SOMEBODY<sub>3</sub> in I.3 is specified as *George*, as the rules of semantic projection exclude other possibilities, permitted by syntax. Various operations transform I.1a, I.2d and I.3 into

I.8 (George saw Henry) surprised George very much because George thought SOMETHING,

cf.

I.8a \*(George saw Henry) surprised George very much because Henry thought SOMETHING<sup>4</sup>

Similar rules require sameness of reference of SOMEBODY<sub>5</sub> in I.5 and SOMEBODY<sub>6</sub> in I.6, as

I.9 In Henry's last letter Henry had not written SOMETHING

is grammatical, while

I.9a \*In Henry's last letter George had not written SOMETHING

is not. Yet, apart from 'common sense' which 'might cover any combination of linguistic and non-linguistic clues' (Gleason 1968: 57), no grammatical rules prevent the interpretation

I.9b In George's last letter George had not written SOMETHING

Semantic specification of SOMEBODY<sub>4</sub> in I.4 and SOMEBODY<sub>7</sub> in I.7 cannot be settled either: though improbable, the embedding of I.4 in I.3

I.10 George thought George was in Wales

is still grammatical, cf., eg.:

George was surprised to see himself still there as *he thought he was in Wales*

Similarly, semantic specification of the result of embedding I.7 in I.6 can produce

I.11a Henry had not written about George's journey to London

I.11b George had not written about Henry's journey to London

I.11c Henry had not written about Henry's journey to London

I.11d George had not written about George's journey to London,

which are all grammatical.

Thus, grammatical rules permit the following interpretations of I:

Ia George<sub>1</sub> was very surprised to see Henry<sub>2</sub> because George<sub>3</sub> thought

<sup>4</sup> For simplicity, I ignore the character of semantic features of verbs *surprise* and *think* that account for sameness of NP's in I.8.

{Henry  
George<sub>4</sub>} was in Wales and in {Henry's  
George's<sub>5</sub>} last letter {Henry  
George<sub>6</sub>} had  
not written about {Henry's  
George's<sub>7</sub>} journey to London,  
with NP<sub>5</sub>=NP<sub>6</sub>.

In consequence, I. is theoretically 8 ways ambiguous and some — still unspecified — features of the context, as well as the reader's 'common sense', are the only disambiguating factors. However, though finally successful, this disambiguation is a tiresome process, and — in spite of its grammaticalness — I. is considered unacceptable. Accordingly, it will be classified as a case of an error of style which calls for remedial procedures. It is the conviction of the present author that in cases like I. contrastive analysis might provide some insights that will prove helpful at finding solutions more instructive than the traditional normative rules of the type 'don't use too many pronouns in one sentence'.

To illustrate this point, let us consider the Polish equivalent of I. A congruent translation will give the following result:

II. \*On<sub>1</sub> był bardzo zdziwiony gdy on<sub>1a</sub> go<sub>2</sub> zobaczył<sup>5</sup>, ponieważ on<sub>3</sub> sądził, że on<sub>4</sub> jest w Walii, a w swoim<sub>5</sub> ostatnim liście on<sub>6</sub> nie pisał o swojej<sub>7</sub> podróży do Londynu.

II. is clearly ungrammatical, as transformational rules in Polish require that anaphoric pronouns in subject position preceding finite verb forms are deleted in the surface realization. The zero anaphora (for further explanation of this term, see Gleason 1968) in such cases may be explained by the fact that the [+Verb] forms comprise the same features ([+Animate, +Human, +Male, +III etc.]) as those comprised in anaphoric pronouns, making the surface realization of the latter over-redundant<sup>6</sup>.

Thus we get

III. Był bardzo zdziwiony gdy go zobaczył, ponieważ sądził, że jest w Walii, a w swoim ostatnim liście nie pisał o swojej podróży do Londynu

The constituent sentences that comprise III. correspond (i.e. are equivalent) to I.1 - I.7 above (a possible confirmation of tacitly postulated identity of deep structures of I. and III.). We list them below for the purpose of further reference:

III.1 COŚ (+S=III.2) bardzo zdziwiło KOGOŚ<sub>1</sub>  
III.2 KTOŚ<sub>1</sub> zobaczył KOGOŚ<sub>2</sub>

<sup>5</sup> The departure from congruence at this point is not considered immediately relevant for the present discussion.

<sup>6</sup> For an illuminating and detailed discussion on pronominal subjects, see Pisarkowa 1969, ch. II.

III.3 KTOŚ<sub>3</sub> sądził COŚ (+S=III.4)  
III.4 KTOŚ<sub>4</sub> jest w Walii  
III.5 KTOŚ<sub>5</sub> napisał list  
III.6 KTOŚ<sub>6</sub> pisał COŚ (+S=III.7)  
III.7 KTOŚ<sub>7</sub> planował podróż do Londynu<sup>7</sup>

As syntactic and semantic projection rules of Polish provide the reader with information equivalent to that provided by rules that had generated I., we get the following interpretations<sup>8</sup>:

III.1a COŚ (+S=III.2) bardzo zdziwiło Jerzego (cf. I.1a)  
III.2a Jerzy zobaczył KOGOŚ<sub>2</sub> (cf. I.2a)  
III.2b \*Jerzy zobaczył Jerzego (If NP<sub>1</sub>=NP<sub>2</sub>, cf. I.2b)  
III.2c Jerzy zobaczył się (If NP<sub>1</sub>=NP<sub>2</sub>, cf. I.2c)  
III.2d Jerzy zobaczył Henryka (cf. I.2d)  
III.8 (Jerzy zobaczył Henryka) bardzo zdziwiło Jerzego, ponieważ Jerzy sądził COŚ (cf. I.8)  
III.8a \*(Jerzy zobaczył Henryka) bardzo zdziwiło Jerzego, ponieważ Henryk sądził COŚ (cf. I.8a)  
III.9 W ostatnim liście Henryka Henryk nie pisał CZEGOŚ (cf. III.9)

III.9a \*W ostatnim liście Henryka Jerzy nie pisał CZEGOŚ (cf. III.9a)  
While III.9 is grammatical and III.9a is not, like in English, no rules (apart from 'common sense') prevent the interpretation

III.9a W ostatnim liście Jerzego Jerzy nie pisał CZEGOŚ (cf. I.9b)  
Semantic specification of KTOŚ<sub>4</sub> in III.4 cannot be settled either. Though somewhat improbable

III.10 Jerzy sądził, że Jerzy jest w Walii (cf. I.10)  
is still grammatical, cf., e.g.:

Jerzy był bardzo zdziwiony, gdy ujrzał się jeszcze w Londynie,  
ponieważ myślał, że jest już w Walii

Contrary to English, however, transformational rules of Polish require that semantic specification of KTOŚ<sub>7</sub> in III.7 is realized unambiguously in relation to the author of the letter. Thus the interpretations

III.11a Henryk nie pisał o podróży Jerzego do Londynu (cf. I.11a)

III.11b Jerzy nie pisał o podróży Henryka do Londynu (cf. I.11b)

are ruled out, as non-identity of reference would require the demonstrative pronoun [+Male, +sing. +III+Gen] *on* in surface realization:

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Notes 2. and 3. above.

<sup>8</sup> To avoid repetition, we only list components of III., equivalent and congruent to the constituent sentences of I.

III.11c  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Henryk} \\ \text{Jerzy} \end{array} \right\}$  nie pisał o *jego* podróży do Londynu<sup>9</sup>

Sameness of reference requires the possessive pronoun *swój*<sup>10</sup>. Thus the only possible interpretations of the surface realization of III.11 are:

III.11d Henryk nie pisał o podróży Henryka do Londynu (cf. I.11c)

III.11e Jerzy nie pisał o podróży Jerzego do Londynu (cf. I.11d)

In consequence, grammatical rules of Polish permit the following interpretations of III:

III.a Jerzy<sub>1</sub> był bardzo zdziwiony, gdy Jerzy<sub>1a</sub> zobaczył Henryka<sub>2</sub>, ponieważ Jerzy<sub>3</sub> sądził, że  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Henryk} \\ \text{Jerzy} \end{array} \right\}_4$  jest w Walii, a w ostatnim liście  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Henryka} \\ \text{Jerzego} \end{array} \right\}_5$   $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Henryk} \\ \text{Jerzy} \end{array} \right\}_6$  nie pisał o podróży  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Henryka} \\ \text{Jerzego} \end{array} \right\}_7$  do Londynu,

with NP<sub>5</sub>=NP<sub>6</sub>=NP<sub>7</sub>. Consequently, III, — even if only theoretically — is four ways ambiguous. The disambiguating factors operate on the same principles as those discussed above in relation to I. Though simpler, the process of disambiguation is still quite complicated and the sentence is felt to be stylistically 'muddled'. It must be remembered, however, that III. is an equivalent of I. which is unacceptable in English. In my search for an explanation of multiple syntactic ambiguity of I. I carried out the following experiment. I. was given to a group of 20 Polish advanced students of English (after seven years of learning) who were not previously acquainted with the original message, intended in I. The students were asked to translate the text into Polish, attempting both at a congruent rendering of the text and at exactness of expression. Out of the 20, only 2 produced versions congruent to III.<sup>11</sup> In the remaining 18 cases, syntactic ambiguity of reference of unspecified proform in III. 4 was resolved by introducing an additional element in surface structure. The following renderings were attested:

III.b Był bardzo zdziwiony, gdy go zobaczył, ponieważ sądził że

$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{a jest on} \\ \text{b ten jest} \\ \text{c kuzyn jest} \\ \text{d Henry jest} \end{array} \right\}$  w Walii, a w swoim ostatnim liście nie pisał o swojej podróży do Londynu.

<sup>9</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I ignore the rules of agreement.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion, see Pisarkowa 1969, ch. V, also pp. 143ff.

<sup>11</sup> Lack of total identity was caused by irrelevant stylistic differentiation between synonyms, e.g., *myślał* v. *sądził*.

The demonstrative pronouns occurred in 12 cases (*on* — 8 times, *ten* — 4 times), other elements (i.e. repetition of *name* or its contextual synonyms), respectively, 2 and 4 times each. It may be postulated that the form most frequently attested, i.e. probably most natural for the respondents, appeared as a restriction on anaphora deletion in case of non-identical NP's. Thus

III.10a Jerzy sądził, że Henryk jest w Walii

undergoes pronominalization to produce

III.10b On sądził, że on jest w Walii.

The rule of anaphora deletion deletes the first pronoun to produce

III.10c Sądził, że on jest w Walii.

The second anaphora is retained in surface structure to serve as the disambiguating factor.<sup>12</sup> As this is its only function, it is permuted to the post-Predicate position:

III.10d Sądził, że jest on w Walii.

Z. Klemensiewicz gives the following explanation for this transformation in Polish: 'Jeżeli mianowicie podmiot jest wyrażony zaimkiem osobowym *ja*, *ty*, *my*, *wy* lub wskazującym *on* itd., *to*, a nie ma na sobie wyraźnego przycisku treściowego, zajmuje miejsce po orzeczeniu. Jest to zrozumiałe, ponieważ orientację co do podmiotu daje pod względem formalnym osobowa forma czasownika, pod względem faktycznym sytuacja towarzysząca wypowiedzeniu.' (Klemensiewicz 1969: 224).

Thus, the only actual syntactic ambiguity in IIIb is that involved in establishing which of the two participants had written the letter, without mentioning his plans to visit London. However, it was immediately resolved by another group of respondents (20 native speakers of Polish, selected at random) who, given IIIb (in the context of the preceding sentence) judged it to be 'correct'<sup>13</sup>. If we consider the fact that I. was classified as unacceptable (by a group of 5 native speakers and 20 Polish students), we can postulate the hypothesis that the crucial difference may involve the disambiguating factors, present in IIIb and absent from I. These comprise:

1. All operations that transform III.10a into III.10d and result in retaining the second anaphora (with the shift of order),
2. Selection of interpretations III.11d and III.11e (cf. p. 16 above) with subsequent selection of lexical items in pronominalization.

Their absence in English is due to, respectively:

1. The general requirement of surface realization on anaphoric pronouns,
2. Lexical neutralization in surface realization:

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the example 'wie, że on cierpi' in Pisarkowa (1969: 96), with the comment that 'tożsamość osoby wyklucza zwiększenie wyrazistości znaku od postaci zerowej do zaimkowej' (97).

<sup>13</sup> Some respondents suggested minor changes in wording, irrelevant in view of our chief interest.

I.11a - I.11d are all realized as

I.11 {Henry }  
 {George } had not written about *his* journey to London,

with the [+Pron] form copying the nonspecific features of either *George* or *Henry* (i.e. [+Human, +Male, +sing. +III etc.]), while in Polish

a. III.11a and III.11b are realized as

III.11c {Henryk }  
 {Jerzy } nie pisał o *jego* podróży do Londynu,

with the [+Pron] form copying the nonspecific features of *Jerzy* (in III.11a) or *Henryk* (in III.11b) (i.e. [+Human, +Male, +sing. +III etc.]),

b. III.11d and III.11e are realized as

III.11f {Henryk }  
 {Jerzy } nie pisał o *swojej* podróży do Londynu,

with the [+Pron] form copying the nonspecific features of the Noun which it determines (i.e. number, gender, case).<sup>14</sup>

Apart from any attempt at formulization (taxonomic or operational) of these rules, production of I. by a Polish learner can be hypothetically explained as due to interlingual transfer: factors of syntactic disambiguation in Polish, rendered by their English surface structure equivalents, simply *do not work*, which the learner probably just does not realize.

Obviously, ample research is needed before such an assumption acquires any general value, but the discussion presented above seems to justify the following postulates:

1. syntactic ambiguity, as a possible source of stylistic errors, can be considered a legitimate part of error analysis. It is classified as an error when it becomes an obstacle in language communication, and as language communication involves the supra-sentence level, it will often be manifested only in the supra-sentence context. Therefore, analysis of syntactic ambiguity will often imply the need for discourse analysis.

2. In foreign-language teaching, syntactic ambiguity as an error of style can be investigated in the context of error analysis in general, i.e. explanation can be looked for among phenomena which concern transfer and other generally recognized factors. But a *stylistic* error is by definition different from what is usually called 'linguistic errors' — it occurs in sentences which are *unacceptable* but not *ungrammatical*. Therefore, the analysis will concern performance rather than competence and would use the actual surface struc-

<sup>14</sup> Any attempt at formulizing this rule would largely exceed the scope of the present discussion.

ture as the starting point for investigation. As shown in the above sample, a theory of language ('grammar') will be found the necessary preliminary for explanation, but the 'level of delicacy', to use M. A. K. Halliday's term, will be dictated by practical needs. In other words, theoretical investigation would reach as 'deep' as actually required in a particular case. It is perhaps for this reason that contrastive analysis, aimed at providing pedagogical implications for language teaching, finds it difficult to establish universal procedures to evaluate methods imposed by particular language theories.

3. In view of the necessity to consider the (linguistic) context in which a syntactically ambiguous sentence operates, the analysis will be rather token- than type-orientated. Thus, in relation to I. above, the ambiguity is also due to the coincidental neutralization of non-specific features: the participants in the discourse analysed are both [+Human, +Male, +sing., +III etc.]. When rules of syntactic relationship of reference, or discourse coherence, are taught, such coincidents must be paid particular attention.

4. Discussions like the one presented above can supply both the linguist and the teacher with some valuable insights concerning the two languages that are being compared. For instance, in respect to I. contrastive analysis shows that such intuitive feelings as that a higher extent of syntactic ambiguity in English, when compared to Polish, is due to the reduced inflectional system of the former language, can often prove misleading or at least unsatisfactory. In view of such hypotheses as the one presented above, it is difficult to apply to foreign-language teaching situations Chomsky's statement that realization of ambiguity presents 'no information to the hearer and teaches him nothing new about his language' (cf. p. 355 above). The learner will obviously gain from being shown the relevant contrast; moreover, teaching stylistics should cover such phenomena as disambiguating factors in English. To relate this to our sample text, it might be useful to quote the correction of I., provided by a native speaker:

I.a He was very surprised to see Henry who, he thought, was in Wales because in his last letter he had not written about coming to London. The disambiguation comprises the following factors<sup>15</sup>:

1. Restoring the semantically specified [+Noun — Pron] form (cf. I.2d),
2. Replacing the nominalization (cf. I.3) with relativization, plus an appositive inserted sentence,
3. Change of lexical elements, i.e. replacing the Noun *journey* with the Action Nominal *coming*,
4. Deletion of Genitival Determiner (cf. I.7) to imply sameness of reference.

It is realized that both formulization and generalization of the above rules will require a great amount of thorough research; the only purpose of the

<sup>15</sup> Listed informally.



informal analysis as it was presented in this paper was to signal the problem and to suggest some possible implications concerning the search for a solution.

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