SYNTACTIC AMBIGUITY IN LEGAL, POLITICAL, MEDIA, AND ACADEMIC REGISTERS OF THAI: PATTERNS AND AVOIDANCE.

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ABSTRACT

This study is an investigation of syntactic ambiguity in Thai. Based on approximately 80 pages of Thai texts from four registers, namely legal register,
political register, media register, and academic register, the study aims to analyze syntactic patterns that induce ambiguity, and to find out which patterns create the most ambiguities and in which registers. Also, devices to avoid such ambiguities are proposed.

The analysis reveals that there are four types of syntactic patterns involving ambiguities: (1) modification construction, (2) coordination construction, (3) modification+coordination construction, and (4) anaphora. The results of the quantitative analysis show that modification construction accounts for more than half of all ambiguities in the study, followed by the modification+coordination construction, coordination construction, and anaphora construction, respectively. Compared across registers, it is found that the media register carries the most ambiguities, followed by the legal register, political register, and academic register, respectively.

To avoid ambiguity, revisions of text are proposed. Ambiguous attachment sites of modifiers can be prevented by constituent reordering and nominal clauses. For the coordination construction, the subject of each of the verbal conjoins should be overt, and coordinators should be consistent for a series of items. In some cases, selected disambiguating materials would also be useful. Either a conjoin-switching technique or the provision of modifiers to both or all conjoined heads would clarify ambiguous modification+coordination constructions. When anaphoric ambiguity is potential, preferred is the repeated use of a word or phrase.

**Introduction**

Language is a symbolic system by means of which humans communicate with each other. To achieve this communicative purpose, it is argued that language should be ultimately clear and precise. However, this is rarely the case since ambiguity does not only exist but is also pervasive in human language. The question of why language is so ambiguous allows for many plausible answers. Zipf (1949), in his *Principle of Least Effort*, reasons that ambiguity is a result of a compromise between the least effort on the part of the speaker and on the part of the listener. Cohen (2006) claims that language is a naturally-evolving system with a high degree of complexity, so it is inevitably highly ambiguous. This ambiguous nature of human language was not noticeable until it was brought into view a few decades ago thanks to the advent of the computer and the emergence of computational linguistics discipline. Martin et al (1987 cited in Wasow et al 2005, 266) reported the surprising number of 455 possible parses assigned by their system to the simple sentence *List sales of the products produced in 1973 with the products produced in 1972*. This number is astonishingly large. Although Grice stated in one of his maxims under the category of manner that seek participants in communicative act to “avoid ambiguity”, Wasow in a series of articles (2002, 2005, and forthcoming) and Arnold et al (2004) argue that people do not actually attempt to avoid ambiguity as much as expected, and that, as a result, ambiguity persists in language.

In resolving language ambiguity, Cohen (2006) asserts that humans are unlike machines because they can rely mostly on their power of inference with the help of
context and extra-linguistic knowledge. Nevertheless, this disambiguating mechanism is far from perfect. Ambiguity still occurs and often leads to inefficient communication, causing misunderstandings, and even disputes, between writer and reader or among readers. That the reader is not certain whether his/her interpretation of a statement corresponds to that intended by the writer can pose significant problems. The case is even worse when the reader’s interpreted meaning turns out to be different from what the writer intends. The consequences can be catastrophic when uncertainties or misunderstandings occur in the interpretation of an expression in any discourse bearing on the lives of all citizens in a society. Legal, political, media, and academic registers exemplify such influential discourse.

Types of Ambiguity

First, there is a distinction to make between two concepts: ambiguity and vagueness. An expression is considered vague when it has a single meaning, but the scope of the meaning is not clear. On the other hand, an expression is ambiguous if it has more than one distinct meaning. Wasow (forthcoming)’s explanation should give a clearer picture of the distinction here:

If expressions are thought of as picking out regions in some semantic space, then ambiguous expressions pick out more than one region, whereas vague expressions pick out regions with fuzzy boundaries

Ambiguity itself can be of either major type: lexical or syntactic ambiguity. A lexical item is characterized as ambiguous when it has more than one denotation. This type of ambiguity is usually a result of homonymy and polysemy. Though this type of ambiguity is very common, it is beyond the scope of the present study.

Ambiguity falls into the syntactic or structural type when an expression has multiple parses, with each a distinct meaning. Though less remarkable than lexical ambiguity, this type of ambiguity exists in a wide variety of language registers. Kapklon (2000, 25 and 29) stated that syntactic ambiguity has different grounds in Structural Grammar than in Transformational Grammar. In view of structuralism, syntactic ambiguity results from word ordering and the relationships between word groups. Transformational linguists view it differently: as resulting from transformational processes which turn different underlying structures into the same surface structure. This type of ambiguity is the central focus of the present study.

An interest in language ambiguity is not restricted to linguists. It is also shared by many scholars from other disciplines. For example, scholars of psychology, such as Hogaboam & Perfetti (1975), Prather & Swinney (1988), Spivey & Tanenhaus (1998), and Mason & Just (2007) and computer science and NLP scholars, such as Hirst (1987), Roth (1998), and Supnithi et al (2014), all address the problems of ambiguity processing and ambiguity resolution. Scholars of law such as Conway (2002), Schane (2002) are likewise concerned with ambiguity avoidance in the drafting of legal texts. Although the vast majority of scholars share roughly the same view that ambiguity is a hindrance to efficient language comprehension, still many others see its constructive role in producing humour, especially in certain genres or

Interestingly, Conway (2002) clearly demonstrates, with ample examples of legal cases, how syntactic ambiguities in articles of law, even in the U.S. Constitution, bring about interpretation difficulties in lawsuits. Likewise, the Thai Constitution was recently the subject of much debate over the interpretation of paragraph 2, of section 68, which provides:

In the case where a person or a political party has committed the act under paragraph one, the person knowing of such act shall have the right to request the Prosecutor General to investigate its fact and submit a motion to the Constitutional Court for ordering the cessation of such act without, however, prejudice to the institution of a criminal action against such person.

The use of the coordinator and has been claimed to be the source of ambiguity. There has been, as a consequence, no consensus on who shall have the right to submit a motion to the Constitutional Court: the person knowing of such act, or the Prosecutor General, or both. This syntactic ambiguity has been made explicit by a linguistic tool in Burakorn (2013).

In Thai, few studies have focused on ambiguity. Most commonly, the topic is discussed only under a chapter or section of a Thai grammar book, language usage textbook, or linguistics textbook. To my knowledge, the most comprehensive would be the study entitled “Ambiguity in Current Thai” by Kapklon (2000) which extensively investigates ambiguity in Thai for its own sake. Other Thai researchers have dealt with ambiguous expressions for different purposes; for Jaroenkiatboworn (2005), Lim (2006), and Chavanalikikorn (2013), it serves as a tool in creating humour; Thaworn (2012) uses it as a tool for evaluating language learners’ competency; Supnithi et al (2014) study the topic for developing a robust NLP system.

Therefore, it is of interest to study ambiguity in Thai, considering it linguistic phenomenon that creates potential difficulty in comprehending text, especially in significant genres or registers, where misunderstanding or misinterpretation of any expression is highly undesirable. Also, because “Prevention is better than cure,” I believe ambiguity should be minimized on the part of the producer rather than of the processor, and will, therefore, suggest methods to prevent ambiguity.

To state clearly, the present study aims to investigate syntactic patterns that induce ambiguity in four registers of the Thai language, namely the legal, political, media, and academic registers, and to identify which patterns and in which registers the most ambiguities occur. Also, this study will propose methods to avoid those ambiguities.

The data for the study were taken from a variety of documents in the four registers mentioned above. The size of text drawn from each register was comparable at around 10,000 words. The details of the sources of data for each register are shown in Table 1 below.
The data were investigated with a focus on ambiguous syntactic patterns. Taken as syntactically ambiguous in this study was any word or construction which could be syntactically related to more than one other word/construction, and hence allow different tree structures. That word/construction was highlighted and counted as an instance of syntactic ambiguity. The type of syntactic relationship was identified for each of the instances. Noted was the possibility of more than one instance of ambiguity in a single sentence. Occurrences of each ambiguous pattern were counted and their relative frequencies were compared across registers to determine which syntactic patterns create the most ambiguities and in which registers. Based on these findings, modifications to syntactic patterns are proposed.

Patterns of syntactic ambiguity

The analysis reveals that there are four major syntactic patterns or constructions responsible for syntactic ambiguity in the data: modification, coordination, modification+coordination, and anaphora.

### Modification

Modification refers to the syntactic relation between two grammatical units one of which is the head and the other is the dependent. While the head is obligatory, the dependent functioning as a modifier of the head (thus called modification) is optional. This kind of syntactic relation forms an endocentric construction. A head may carry multiple modifiers, but not vice versa. So, in this structure, syntactic ambiguity arises when a modifier can attach to more than one head, as shown in example (1).

![Example (1)](image)

In example (1), the verb phrase ‘the most’ may modify the
adjacent verb phût ‘to speak’, as in reading (1a), or the noun sit ‘right’ farther ahead, as in reading (1b). This is because a verb/verb phrase in Thai can function as a modifier of a noun as well as of another verb. The Thai language allows certain grammatical categories such as noun, verb, and preposition to be dependent on a head of more than one category, with no morphological inflection required.

(2) นาย อิลลีย์ อนุ-'มีรัชชั่น 

which has two possible readings:
(a) Mr. Ali Al-Naimi, who is the Petroleum Minister of Saudi Arabia
(b) Mr. Ali Al-Naimi, who is the Petroleum Minister of Saudi Arabia and the world’s biggest oil producer

As example (3) shows, the prepositional phrase khûn sâ-trîi ‘of woman’ may modify only the adjacent noun phrase sît-thî tââng-tââng ‘rights’ as in reading (3a) or the nominalized form kaan-rîâk-rîâ ‘calling’, thus signifying the doer of the action, as in reading (3b). Note that it is very probable to find this type of ambiguity in the attachment of prepositional phrases to nominalized phrases.
Coordination

Coordination refers to the construction which binds two or more syntactic elements of the same level together. The connector is called a coordinator, and the elements bound are called conjuncts or conjoins. The use of a coordinator may be the cause of syntactic ambiguity as shown in example (4).

\[(4) \text{ 'Mr. Kittiratt Na-Ranong, deputy PM and Finance Minister'}\]

which has two possible readings:
(a) The plaintiff has established a commission to inquire of the truth and report the outcomes of the deliberation…
(b) The plaintiff has established a commission to inquire of the truth and reported the outcomes of the deliberation…

This ambiguity is similar to that found in the interpretation of the Thai Constitution formerly mentioned where the coordinator \( \text{lé} \) ‘and’ is used to link two verb phrases. It is not clear, as this example shows, whether the verb phrase \( \text{raay-yaan} \) ‘to report’ after the coordinator is the action of \( \text{khá-ná kam-má-kaan} \) ‘a commission’ as shown in reading (4a) (the coordinator conjoins ‘to inquire’ and ‘to report’) or the action of \( \text{phùu-fông-khá-dii} \) ‘the plaintiff’ as shown in reading (4b) (the coordinator conjoins ‘has established’ and ‘has reported’).

However, in some cases, ambiguities are not attributable to the use of a coordinator, but the presence of a coordinator does not help clarify the statement in terms of referents, as can be shown in example (5).

\[(5) \text{ ‘Mr. Kittiratt Na-Ranong, deputy PM and Finance Minister’}\]

In example (5), considering only the construction with an overt coordinator, it is ambiguous whether ‘Deputy PM’ and ‘Finance Minister’ have the same referent. Simply speaking, the deputy prime minister and the finance minister can refer to two different people, or to one person holding two positions. Even when the context ‘Mr. Kittiratt Na-Ranong’ is taken into account, not every reader can access the true interpretation of the expression but perhaps only those who have good knowledge of Thai politics at that particular time.

In authentic materials, statements are usually more confusing because of the inconsistent use of coordinators. Let’s consider example (6) which involves mentioning individuals in a series.
(6) นางสาวกรด และ นายอนุธีน คาร์สทเมน์ _
ผู้ว่าการธนาคารกลางของเนิ้งซิป กับ
นายสมเด็จ ฟิชเชอร์ ผู้ว่าการธนาคารกลาง
ของอิสราเอล และ อิตาลีของผู้อธิบายการ
ไอมอร์ (media register)

naay laa-kàat lé naay wɔ-kús-tin
Ms. Lagarde and Mr. Agustín
kàas-hèn _ phuu-wàa-kaan
Carstens governor
thá-naa-khaan klaay khɔɔŋ
Bank central of
mèk-si-koo káp naay sà-teen-li
Mexico with/and Mr. Stanley
fich-chòo _ phuu-wàa-kaan
Fischer governor
thá-naa-khaan klaay khɔɔŋ
bank central of
it-sà-laaw-el
Israel

which has at least two possible readings:

(a) Lagarde, and Agustín Carstens,
Governor of the Bank of Mexico, and
Stanley Fischer, Governor of the Bank
of Israel and former First Deputy
Managing Director of the IMF
(3 people mentioned)

(b) Lagarde, and Agustín Carstens,
Governor of the Bank of Mexico, and
Stanley Fischer, Governor of the Bank
of Israel, and the former First Deputy
Managing Director of the IMF
(4 people mentioned)

In reading (6a), three people are
mentioned by name: Lagarde is
mentioned with nothing attached, Agustín
Carstens with his position in apposition,
and Stanley Fischer with his two positions
in apposition. In reading (6b), four people
are mentioned; the first three are
mentioned by name with and without their
positions attached, while the last is a
distinct person mentioned only by his
position. It is worth noting that the
coordinators are used inconsistently; while
the first lé ‘and’ clearly connects person 1
to person 2, the word káp ‘with/and’ is
used instead to serve the same function
between person 2 and person 3, and the
second lé ‘and’ is confusingly used to form
a link either between person 3 and person
4 or between two positions of person 3,
which represents the construction in the
lower order.

Modiﬁcation+Coordination

This pattern represents the interplay
between two different constructions,
modiﬁcation and coordination, when they
cooexist. In this pattern, ambiguity results
from neither the modiﬁcation nor
coordination construction alone. Rather, it
is only when both constructions occur
together that ambiguity emerges. A simple
English example, taken from Wasow
(forthcoming), clearly shows ambiguity of
this type; Teachers and students of the
speaker received priority seating. In this
example sentence, the modiﬁcation
construction (students of the speaker)
alone cannot produce ambiguity, and
neither can the coordination construction
(teachers and students) only. However,
when both constructions are put together,
the sentence becomes ambiguous as to
whether the prepositional phrase of the
speaker modiﬁes only students or the
whole construction teachers and students.
The following examples (7) and (8)
exhibit this ambiguous syntactic pattern.

(7) ขอหมายทุกติดและแม้ก็ดีที่มุมemu
อย่างไรก็เถอะ (legal register)
Syntactic Ambiguity in Legal, Political, Media, and Academic Registers of Thai

kê-hâa thú-cà-rít lé lá-máɔt
allegation dishonest and violate
sít-thí mà-nùt-sà-yà-chon
right humanity
yàaŋ ráay-reey
seriously

which has two possible readings:
(a) allegations of dishonesty and serious human rights violation
(b) allegations of serious dishonesty and serious human rights violation

(8) แคลิมภ์รัฐธรรมนูญสิทธิเสรีภาพของบุคคล
human rights violation

Anaphora

Anaphora may be defined as the relation between at least two elements which are coreferential. One element is called the anaphor, and the other the antecedent. The (co)reference of an anaphor can only be retrieved through the interpretation of its antecedent. The antecedent usually comes earlier in the context (sentence level or discourse level) than its anaphor. Anaphors may be represented by different anaphoric expressions. Ambiguity arises when it is not evident to which element an anaphoric expression refers back, so the referent of the anaphoric expression in question is indeterminable.

The analysis shows that the three types of anaphoric expressions in Thai involving ambiguity of this type are referring expressions, pronouns, and ellipsis or zero anaphors.

In each instance, the coordination of verbs/verb phrases is followed by a modifier, the adverb yàaŋ ráay-reey ‘seriously’ in (7) and the prepositional phrase taam kham-sàŋ sàām waàá decree court COMP…

which has two possible readings:
(a) the plaintiff has filed the plaint and clarified supplementary facts according to court decree…
(b) According to court decree, the plaintiff has filed the plaint and clarified supplementary facts…

In example (9) below, the word an ‘matter’, the subject of the last sentence, holds an anaphoric relation to an issue concerning wages previously mentioned, but it is not clear whether khàa-tɔɔp-theen khàa-càñ ‘wages (in general)’, kaan-kàam-nòt prù-kàaŋ khàa-càñ ‘the announcement of wage rates’, or khàa-càñ khàn-tàm ‘the minimum wage’ is held in that relation.
(9) Similarly, pronouns can often be a source of anaphoric ambiguity. Upon encountering a pronoun, the reader can be quite certain that it must refer to something. However, when the reader cannot clearly identify what it refers to, the expression is considered ambiguous. Examples (10) and (11) demonstrate ambiguity resulting from the use of the pronouns naa ‘she’ and than ‘he/you’ respectively.

(10) Bussaba2 or Unakan decided to leave, because Bussaba1 refused to observe the traditional social values. However, when the reader

of which the last sentence has three possible readings:

(a) The matter of wages is what we have been pursuing continuously.
(b) The matter of a wage rates announcement is what we have been pursuing continuously.
(c) The matter of the minimum wage is what we have been pursuing continuously.
Example 10 describes the conflict between Bussaba1, a female character in a stage play based on Thai literature, and Bussaba2, another female character depicting the inner rebellious soul of the same individual, who disguises herself as a man under the name Unakan. In example 10, the main clause contains two entities of the same gender, Bussaba2 or Unakan at the subject position, and Bussaba1 as a prepositional complement. However, there is only one anaphoric pronoun naa’y ‘she’ in the subordinate clause that follows. The female pronominal form naa’y ‘she’ here is the subject of the subordinate clause and ambiguous, at least when the sentence is taken in isolation, as it can well be associated with either of the two entities in the immediately preceding clause. In example (11), the use of the homonym than ‘he/you’ accounts for the ambiguity because there are at least two different than ‘he/you’ in Thai; one is an addressee honorific (2nd person) and the other is a referent honorific (3rd person). Reading (11a) shows the pronoun is considered to be a referent honorific, thus referring to the prime minister, whereas reading (11b) shows that the pronoun being interpreted as an addressee honorific makes reference to the audience addressed at the beginning of the expression.

There are also cases where the expressions are ambiguous because of ellipsis. Ellipsis is a linguistic process in which words are omitted if they are recoverable from the context. Elliptical sentences contain gaps where the words are omitted. These gaps are sometimes regarded as being filled by zero pronouns or zero anaphors to make the sentences grammatical. Because no explicit clue is left for tracing back to the antecedent, it is likely that the referents of the zero anaphors are not achieved. This can be shown in example (12).
phrž mēē-khāa krōt
because female vendor angry
"ʔ kōp cā pay tōp "ʔ khrāp
ʔ AV will go slap ʔ PART.

which has two possible readings:
a) Red-shirts were carrying signs. It almost ended up in a brawl because a vendor got upset. Then, the red-shirts were going to slap the vendor.
b) Red-shirts were carrying signs. It almost ended up in a brawl because a vendor got upset. Then, the vendor was going to slap the red-shirts.

It is evident that the sentence kōp cā pay tōp ‘going to slap’ leaves gaps at the positions of its subject (the agent) and object (the patient) after ellipsis. Additionally, the noun phrase sūa deēŋ ‘red-shirts’ and the noun mēē-khāa ‘female vendor’ from the preceding sentences are both possible candidates to fill in both gaps. Ambiguity arises as to who was going to slap whom.

Frequencies of syntactic ambiguity

Table 2 and Figure 1 demonstrate the frequencies of occurrences of syntactic patterns inducing ambiguity in all four registers of the study. The numbers shown in the table indicate the frequency of each particular ambiguous pattern in relation to one thousand words in the data.

As can be seen in Table 2 and Figure 1, the construction most accountable for syntactic ambiguities in every register is modification. This construction on the whole gives rise to an average of 7.15 modifier-attachment ambiguities (out of 1,000 word-long text), thus accounting for more than half of all ambiguous expressions found. On the other hand, ambiguities from coordination and anaphoric ambiguities occur less often, respectively, at 1.78 and 1.28 on average. It is also interesting to note that ambiguities resulting from modification+coordination yield a surprisingly high frequency at an average of 3.63, though much lower than that of modification alone.

Considering each of the constructions separately, it appears that ambiguous modifying expressions occur most often in media register (10.1) and political register (8.1). On the other hand, it is most likely to find instances of modification+coordination ambiguity in legal register (5.7) and media register (4.4). The highest frequency of ambiguity from the coordination construction is in media and academic registers (2.1). Lastly, most anaphoric ambiguities can be found in media register (2.3) as well as in political register (2.1).

Regarding the question of which register carries the most syntactically ambiguous expressions, the media register contains the highest frequency of ambiguities overall, followed by the legal register, political register, and academic register, respectively. It should be noted that while the frequencies of the first three do not vary greatly—within a comparable range of 14.2-18.9, the frequency of the last is significantly lower at only 6.1. Therefore, it is quite apparent that the Thai academic register is rarely ambiguous.

Although the modification construction contributes most frequently to ambiguity in every register, this does not really surprise us since modification is a very common approach for supplying additional information to statements, and thus used very often in all of the registers.
Table 2: Frequencies of ambiguous syntactic patterns in media, legal, political, and academic registers
(shown in relation to 1,000 word-long data)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic Pattern</th>
<th>Media Register</th>
<th>Legal Register</th>
<th>Political Register</th>
<th>Academic Register</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>modification</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>7.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modification+</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>3.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coordination</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anaphora</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>13.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, some other constructions seem to be favored only in certain registers. This might explain the different reasons for ambiguity in different registers.

Media register is the most ambiguous, as can be observed from the higher frequencies of almost all the ambiguous patterns in this register than in the other registers. It is possible that, limited by the space of publication or air time, the statements of the media must be heavily loaded with excessive amounts of information. Thus, the media has to employ certain grammatical devices such as zero pronouns, reduced relative clauses, the omission of complementizers, etc. for the sake of brevity, which may in turn create ambiguity. In addition, modifying phrases are added in such a disorganized manner, one after another, that the reader cannot locate their attachment sites correctly.

Unexpectedly, the legal register is fairly high in ambiguity despite its obligation to be totally clear. This is due largely to the fact that ambiguous modification+coordination constructions occur very frequently in law texts. In an attempt to create the quality of explicitness, all associated parties, matters, etc. are specified in statements of law and court judgments by using coordination constructions, with each or all of the conjoined entities modified by some descriptive expressions. For explicitness’s sake, the ambiguity of anaphoric expressions is scarce in this register.

In contrast, the political register seems to be inadvertently ambiguous because of the ambiguous use of anaphora. To create cohesive links between utterances or sentences in their discourse, politicians often use anaphoric expressions when discussing a particular subject. Short anaphoric forms, such as pronouns and zeroes, are usually favoured in a spoken discourse, for ease of use or perhaps for the effect of creating a friendly informal atmosphere. These anaphors can give rise to inadvertent ambiguity where the context cannot clearly suggest the referents. This is in part due to the inclusion of public speeches and TV talk shows in the data.

The academic register is far less ambiguous than the others, as can be observed from the relatively lower frequencies of almost all the ambiguous patterns in this register, compared to those in the other registers. The reason might lie in the fact that academic writers, in writing articles of this genre, need to take careful step when making a claim or arguing for a certain point. As a result, their writing is usually crafted with neatly-ordered expressions, as well as carefully-selected words, to clearly express only the intended meanings of the statements. Also, academic papers go through some editing process which then allows further revision.

**Methods to avoid ambiguity**

This section is an attempt to suggest methods to reduce syntactic ambiguities during production of text in order to facilitate the interpretation task on the other end. Based on the findings in the previous sections, it can be observed that ambiguities stem from various syntactic patterns. Hence, the text is amended differently for each type of syntactic ambiguity. Since ambiguity implies more than one plausible interpretation of a single expression, the real intent of the writer/speaker must be obtained in order to determine the correct or intended interpretation of the expression. The proposed revisions are as follows.
Revisions to the modification construction

The construction of modification accounts for most ambiguities in all of the registers studied. Dealing with this construction properly will thus greatly reduce the number, if not also the degree, of ambiguities in the text. Most ambiguities of this type can be avoided by a rearrangement of constituents in the sentence. It is assumed that modifiers should be placed as close to their heads as possible. Based on this assumption, the problematic verb phrase māak thiī-sūt ‘the most’ in example (1) should be treated as modifying its adjacent verb phūut ‘to speak’, allowing the reading ‘I have the right to speak the most’ only. Instead, if the other reading ‘I have the highest right to speak’ is intended, the modifying verb phrase should be placed right after the noun sīt ‘right’, as shown in example (13) below.

(13) โม่ผิีิติีานที่สูทิีนที่สูทิี
phōm mīi sīt māak thiī-sūt
I have right much most
thīī cā phūut
COMP will speak
‘I have the highest right to speak.’

In the case that ambiguities arise as a result of the modification construction between head nominalized phrases and modifying prepositional phrases as in example (3), it should be treated on the same assumption that the modifier is attached to the nearest item possible. As a result, example (3) should only yield the reading ‘The trend in the first period was the call for women’s rights’ where the prepositional phrase ‘of woman’ is attached to the noun phrase ‘rights’.

However, for (3) to be interpreted as ‘The trend in the first period was the women’s calling for (something)’s rights’, the statement should be rephrased with the use of a nominal clause or noun complement instead of a prepositional phrase. In Thai, a nominal clause can be constructed by putting the head noun kaan or ruàng ‘story’, for instance, together with the complementizer thiī or wāa in front of a finite clause. Example (14) below demonstrates the rephrased unequivocal version of (3).

(14) กระเดินในระยะแรกนี้เป็นการติีานที่ติีีิอิ่อเริ่้อง
“สิ่่น”ติ่งๆ (academic register)
krā-sēe nay rá-yá réēk nīi pen
trend in period first this be
kaan thiī sā-trīi rīak-rṓŋ sīt-thī
NOM COMP woman call rights
tāaŋ-tāaŋ
various
‘The trend in the first period was the women’s calling for (something)’s rights’

Revisions to the coordination construction

For the coordination construction, as in example (4), to be free of ambiguities, the intended subject of the verb right after the coordinator must be clearly stated. In written documents, it may be accompanied by a space before the coordinator to split two clauses. This is shown in examples (15) and (16).
‘The plaintiff has established a commission to inquire of the truth and the plaintiff has reported the outcomes of the deliberation…’

Differently, the ambiguity in example (6) can be attenuated, if not eliminated, by the consistent use of coordinators as well as the provision of some disambiguating materials. I suggest example (17) as a disambiguated version of (6).

(17) นางลาการ์ด และ นางอภิสันต์ คาร์สเทนส์ ซึ่งเป็นผู้บริหารธนาคารกลางของเม็กซิโก และนายแอนดีเรซ์ ฟิชเชอร์ ซึ่งเป็นผู้บริหารธนาคารกลางของอิสราเอลที่ได้รับการผู้อานวยการไอเอิมโอเอ (media register) นาฏย้า-ก้าต เล่ นาฏย้า โค-กัส-ติน Ms. Lagarde and Mr. Agustín kās-thēn suy pen phu-va-kaan Carstens REL be governor thā-naa-kaan klaay khōng bank central of mēk-si-koo lé naay sa-teen-lī Mexico and Mr. Stanley fich-chāo suy pen thāy Fischer REL be also phu-va-kaan governor thā-naa-kaan klaay khōng bank central of it-sa-laai-el lé a-diit rōng Israel and past deputy phu-am-nuaj-kaan ay-em-ēf managing director IMF ‘Lagarde, and Agustín Carstens, who is the Governor of the Bank of Mexico, and Stanley Fischer, who is
both the Governor of the Bank of Israel and the former First Deputy Managing Director of the IMF’ (3 people mentioned)

In (17), the sequence of words ที่เป็นกับ ‘who/which is’ and the word ที่ ‘both’ are used as disambiguating materials. ที่ here introduces a relative clause which should be used in place of the apposition construction. This is because the apposition construction can easily be confused with the coordinating construction with no overt coordinator. The word ที่ ‘both’ when followed by a coordinating construction normally suggests that the linguistic element immediately after it is the first conjoin of the coordination that follows. It rules out the possibility that any preceding linguistic element is mistakenly considered as the conjoin of that coordination. When used in (17), it helps indicate that ‘Governor of Central Bank of Israel’ and ‘former Deputy Managing Director of IMF’ are positions held by Mr. Fischer. These two disambiguating materials can also be used to clarify the construction in example (5), as can be seen in example (18) below.

(18) นายกิติรัตน์ ณ ระนอง ซึ่งเป็นพย	
นางาฤทธิ์และ นายกรัฐมนตรี (media register)
aa-y kit-ti-rat ná rá-ñang
Mr. Kittiratt Na Ranong

ที่เป็นกับ รัฐ นา-ยัก ลี
REL be both deputy PM and minister
‘Kittiratt Na Ranong, who is both the deputy PM and the finance minister’

Revisions to the modification+coordination

Based on the analysis, the occurrences of ambiguities from this pattern are relatively frequent in the legal and media registers, which usually involve enumeration of items and the provision of extra information for the sake of explicitness. The modifier in this construction can be interpreted as modifying only one conjoin adjoining it or modifying the whole coordinate. In the former case, the unequivocal statement can be obtained by switching conjoins in the construction, as shown in example (19) derived from (7).

(19) ข้อหากิติรัตน์ดำเนินคดีกรณีร่างร่างจว	
ทุจริต (legal register)

kā-hāa ː là-ːmōt sīt-thī
allegation violate right
má-nūt-sā-yā-chon
humanity

yān rāy-ːrey ːlē thiː-ːcā-ːrit
seriously and dishonesty
‘allegations of dishonesty and serious human rights violation’

In the latter case, the unequivocal statement can be obtained by supplying both conjoins with the modifier, as can be seen in example (20).

(20) ข้อหากิติรัตน์ดำเนินคดีกรณีร่างร่างจว	
มนุษย์ (legal register)

kā-hāa thiː-ːcā-ːrit
allegation dishonest

yān rāy-ːrey ːlē
seriously and
Revisions to the anaphora construction

As its definition suggests, anaphora holds a relation between anaphors whose references are not clear in themselves and their antecedents whose references are obvious. In cases where the use of anaphora might give rise to ambiguity, the writer should consider repeating the words intended. With the original words provided, the expressions should be clear by themselves because there is no need to search for the references elsewhere. Examples (21) and (22) present disambiguated versions of (10) and (12) in respective order.

(21) บุษบาที่ได้รับผลกระทบดังกล่าวไปอย่าง
บุษบา เพราะบุษบาปฏิเสธที่จะยอมรับ
การดำเนินการตามคำนิยามแบบสั้นขึ้นในอดีต
(buīt-sā-baq ruūw u-naa-kan)
Bussaba2 or Unakan
tāt-sīn-cay thīī cā pay cāak
decline COMP will go from
buīt-sā-baq
Bussaba1
phrā-wāa buīt-sā-baq
because Bussaba1
pā-tī-śee thīī cā yūmm-rāp
refuse COMP will accept
kaan-dam-nōn-chii-wit tāam
NOM-live a life follow

(22) ระหว่างสู้ที่มีอยู่ด้านตะวันออก
เวียนน้
โดยไม่ได้รับทราบว่าใครจะได้
ไปตามหลักทรัพย์
rā-wāā ngān kād mīi klīm
during walk AV have group
sūā deēŋ yōk chūu pāay
shirt red carry raise sign
wan nān kuāp dāay-rūāŋ
day that almost go into trouble
phrō mēe-khāā kroōt
because female vendor angry
sūā deēŋ kād cā pay tōıp
shirt red AV will go slap
mēe-khāā khrap
female vendor PART.
‘Red-shirts were carrying signs. It
almost ended up in a brawl because a
vendor got upset. Then, the red-
shirts were going to slap the
vendor.’

However, wordiness may be a consequence of some of the proposed techniques, i.e. using a nominal clause, adding disambiguating materials, supplying subjects or modifiers to both conjoins of the coordination, and repeating words. Many writing experts advise writers to avoid wordy sentences and repetitive wording which would make the text tedious to read. This advice sounds reasonable to the extent that it does not permit ambiguity. Criticism of a text for being wordy and tedious, in my
opinion, is a cheap price to pay for the clarity. This idea is supported by Conway (2002, 2-3) in his opinion about lengthy legal drafts: “Drafters with a comprehension of basic logic, and the ability to recognize (and avoid) unintended syntactic ambiguity, can construct lengthy sentences which are nevertheless clear and precise.”

The types of syntactic ambiguity found in this study may be recognized, perhaps only under careful interpretation, by any native speaker of Thai who is adept at making use of his/her linguistic competence, and the avoidance strategies proposed here should not be beyond the abilities of linguistically competent language users. Nonetheless, the present study helps to make evident how ambiguity is structurally realized in the actual Thai language, at least to non-native speakers if not also to lay Thai people. It might be asked why there are still numerous instances of syntactic ambiguity even in these socially significant registers, if they can be that easily recognized and avoided. This might suggest that there are some attributes brought about by ambiguity required by these registers. However, I shall leave this issue for further research.

**Conclusion**

This study investigates syntactic ambiguities in four registers of Thai: legal, political, media, and academic. The analysis shows that the four syntactic patterns involving ambiguities are the modification construction, coordination construction, modification+coordination construction, and anaphora construction. In relation to the occurrences of ambiguities from each construction, it was found that modification is the construction most accountable for ambiguities in this study since it constitutes more than half of all ambiguities in all registers. Following are the modification+coordination construction, coordination construction alone, and anaphora construction, in respective order. Regarding the distribution of ambiguities across registers, it was found that the media register accommodates the most ambiguities, closely followed by the legal register and political register. That the academic register is far behind in this respect signifies that this register is rarely ambiguous.

To avoid ambiguities, a number of text revisions are proposed. The problem of attachment of modifiers can be handled by a rearrangement of constituents in the sentence, based on the assumption that modifiers are placed closest to their heads. The use of nominal clauses can be of much help in the case of prepositional phrases modifying nominalized phrases. For the coordination construction, overt subjects should be supplied to both verbal conjoins of the coordinate structure if misinterpretation is potential. For the coordination involving a series of items, the consistent use of coordinators together with the application of well-selected disambiguating materials should play a substantial role in preventing ambiguity. The presence of a modifier in the coordination construction can also give rise to ambiguity. The techniques of switching conjoins or supplying both conjoins with the modifier can clarify the attachment site of the modifier. Lastly, in the case of anaphora, indeterminable references of anaphoric expressions, be they referring expressions, pronouns, or zero anaphors, should be avoided by the repetition of their antecedents.
References


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