

ANALYSIS OF STRUCTURAL AMBIGUITIES CAUSED BY CIRCUMSTANTIAL ADJUNCT-LOCATION IN MALAYSIA'S COVID-19 NEWSPAPER REPORTS

Ahmad Fahmi Ramli

Pusat Pemajuan Kompetensi Bahasa, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Tel: +6014-5414829 Email: fahmi_ramli@upm.edu.my

Siti Nur Amalina A'dilah Muhammad

Fakulti Pengajian Umum dan Pendidikan Lanjutan, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin

Tel: +6011-11993791 E-mail: adilahmuhamad@unisza.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic all over the world back in 2020 had a big impact on the mass media industry, as it became a main issue to be updated daily. A newspaper is one of the mass media platforms that provides daily updates regarding COVID-19 and other general issues that are related to the pandemic. It is crucial for a journalist to prepare a good constructive newspaper article to ensure comprehensive news updates for the readers. This study aims to analyse circumstantial adjuncts found in Malaysia's COVID-19 newspaper reports, as they can cause structural ambiguities in a newspaper report write-up. This research implemented a descriptive qualitative study that involved the content analysis method of the Malaysian English newspaper, *New Straits Times*, in the whole edition of December 2020 and January 2021. However, only COVID-19 reports were selected to be analysed using the circumstantial adjunct framework by Halliday (1994). Then, the bracketing approach by Yules (2014) was applied to explain in detail the construction of structural ambiguities caused by circumstantial adjunct-location found in the selected newspaper reports.

Keywords: Malaysia's Covid-19 Newspaper Reports; Structural Ambiguities; Circumstantial Adjunct-Location

1. Introduction

The World Health Organisation (WHO) was informed of unknown cases of pneumonia in Wuhan City, China back on December 31, 2019. It was later quickly spread throughout China's regions to other states and became a wide world crisis. On January 30, 7736 affirmed and 12167 speculated cases accounted for in China, and 82 affirmed cases had been identified in 18 different countries (Salleh et. al, 2020). Coronavirus disease 19 (COVID-19) was detailed and it is a highly transmittable, pathogenic viral infection. Salleh et.al. (2020) explained that COVID-19 epidemic is a public health emergency of international concern and poses threats to psychological resilience such as anxiety, panic, stress, and other emotional problems. This global issue has put the mass media industry like newspaper industry to keep updating on Covid-19 issues daily.

Newspapers are one of the most reliable sources used to search for any information or updates regarding national or global issues. It is one of the traditional media platforms that provides the main source of information since the early and middle of the 20th century (Hisham, 2019). According to Nelson (1998), the first newspaper was published in 1609 in Germany. This proves that newspapers have been together with humans ever since, thus it is regarded as one of the trustful sources for mankind. However, some might argue that the mass media are good at twisting a story to make their stories believable to target readers. Morgan (2018) claimed that mass media would purposely attempt to spread false information or sow doubt in people's minds.

In spite of being the most reliable source of information to mankind, there are still flaws that can be traced from newspapers in the aspect of their content and writing style. Some journalists tend to switch or twist stories they write to make them newsworthy and interesting enough to be published, including using ambiguous sentences which cause confusion among readers. Olusanya (2017) found

out that ambiguity is a linguistic tool for a journalist to draw any attention from audiences and also mislead them deliberately in understanding the news.

Structural ambiguities can lead readers to misinterpret the news they read. Oluga (2010) stated that “Ambiguity can therefore be a hindrance to effective communication just because of the semantic confusion that arises from the susceptibility of an ambiguous expression to double or multiple semantic interpretations” (p.38). Even though ambiguous sentences are meant to be more than a single interpretation, but to have insignificant interpretations may cause misunderstanding among the readers regarding the intended message trying to be conveyed. “The journalists sometimes use ambiguity in presenting the news. This often creates different interpretations from people who read it” (Puspitasari, Beratha & Wandia, 2019, p.20).

It is believed that writing long sentences in a news article can help to elaborate more the information of the news in detail. Nevertheless, a poor long sentence construction brings negative impacts to readers, Dewi (2021) argues that a long sentence written in a newspaper brings some disadvantages to the comprehension among readers which can hardly be understood and sometimes too ambiguous. For example, the use of adjuncts in the newspapers as a writing technique to reach the complexity of a sentence structure eventually leads to structural ambiguity. “The level of adjuncts is purposed to express the place, process, time, cause, and reason” (Dewi, 2020, p. 218). For instance, “*She goes to school by car*”. ‘*By car*’ functions as an adjunct because it gives an idea of the process on how ‘*She goes to school*’. In the English language, the vast use of adjunct in newspaper writing has become a norm due to the fact that adjunct helps to extend the elaboration of information of a message. Mirzahoseini et. al (2015) mentioned that the use of adjunct in English language is common because it indicates the detailed explanation on the sentence description although ambiguity may occur if that sentence is to be translated into the other language.

Halliday (1994) categorizes Adjunct into several types which are Circumstantial Adjunct, Modal Adjunct and Conjunctive Adjunct. “Circumstantial Adjunct used the expression ‘circumstances associated with’ or ‘attendant on the process’, referring to examples such as the location of an event in time or space, its manner, or its cause; and these notions of ‘when, where, how and why’ the thing happens provided the traditional explanation, by linking circumstances to the four WH-forms that were adverbs rather than noun (Halliday, 2014, p. 311). This explains a perspective of circumstantial adjunct can be simply understood by looking at a clause that expresses an essence of location, time, manner.

Hence, this study is purposely to analyse the use of circumstantial adjunct-location in Malaysia’s Covid-19 newspaper reports which caused structural ambiguities in their content. This study was conducted based on its research question ‘*How can circumstantial adjuncts-location type cause structural ambiguities in Malaysia’s Covid-19 newspaper articles?*’. It is important to note that this research is limited to syntactic analysis only, so the data were explained from syntactic perspectives without in-depth explanation on semantic perspectives.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Structural Ambiguity

In a study of syntax, there is a small part under it concerning an interpretation of sentences with more than one meaning. This is called a structural ambiguity (also known as syntactic ambiguity) when a sentence may be interpreted in different ways. Denham and Lobeck (2013) defined structural ambiguity as a sentence or a phrase that has more than one meaning due to extra syntactic structure

within the sentence or phrase. “Structural ambiguity, on the other hand, occurs when a phrase or a sentence has more than one underlying structure, such as the phrases ‘*English history teacher*’, ‘*short men and women*’, ‘*The girl hit the boy with a book*’.” (Khawalda & Al-Saidat, 2012, p.1). It is understood that extra syntactic structure in a sentence is one of the main factors that may lead to structural ambiguity. Although the sentences might look common like other ordinary simple sentences, in-depth, they have detailed explanations to prove that they are ambiguous in nature. Khawalda and Al-Saidat (2012) gave this example: the phrase ‘*English history teacher*’ can be interpreted as a teacher who teaches an English history subject or a history teacher who is an English native speaker. So, the word ‘*English*’ can either relate to the Noun Phrase ‘*history teacher*’ or to the noun ‘*history*’. Hence, both interpretations are accurate although there is no confirmation of the intended meaning conveyed by the writer. It could mean either a teacher who teaches an English history subject or also the ethnicity of a history teacher. A general descriptive content analysis research was done by Bustam (2012) to give a thorough explanation of the ambiguity concepts in the English language when the researcher goes into a deep discussion on causes of ambiguities. For example, he noted that a noun phrase can trigger a structural ambiguity in the English language whereby an adjective gets along together with the noun head or the noun itself. To make it clear, ‘*Old school teacher*’ where the adjective ‘*old*’ can modify the Noun Phrase ‘*school teacher*’ or the noun ‘*school*’ itself. This explains the fact that a phrase attachment causes a sentence to be ambiguous.

2.2 Circumstantial Adjunct

Circumstantial Adjunct has been well explained by M.A.K Halliday (1994) under his theory Systematic Functional Grammar (SFG). Halliday suggests that grammar is beyond the study of a language structure or prescribed rules. Halliday (2014) mentioned a text can be distinguished from two different perspectives, firstly, a text can be focused in its own right and on the other hand, a text functions as a tool for finding out about something else. In other words, functional grammar explains how grammar creates a meaning subtly to the context of a text. Halliday has accepted the fact that linguistics should describe a sentence with many functions rather than merely giving a focus on its deep structure (Almurashi, 2016).

It is important to note that Circumstantial Adjunct explains a clause in a sentence that usually comes from Adverbial Phrase (AdvP) or Prepositional Phrase (PP) (Halliday, 2014). The clause in general explains the idea of location, extent (time) or manner which describes additional information related to the main subject or Noun Phrase (NP) of a sentence, thus circumstantial adjunct plays an important role in a sentence construction to ensure its meaning is expressible. Dewi (2021) mentioned “Circumstantial adjunct is one of the important elements in the clause. Therefore, it is significant to know as part of the clause which is used to express meaning through sentences (p. 176)”. There are nine types of Circumstantial Adjunct proposed by Halliday that should be taken into account. Nurhasanah (2017) explained briefly those types; Extent, Location, Manner, Cause, Contingency, Accompaniment, Role, Matter and Angle.

- i) Extent- “It is the degree to which a thing extends. It can be length, area, volume, and scope. It is expressed in terms of some unit of measurement such as yards, rounds, and years”(p.119).
- ii) Location- “It is a type of circumstantial adjunct which shows position or place”(p.119).
- iii) Manner- “It is typically expressed by a prepositional phrase with the preposition *by* or *with* which refers to the means where the process takes place”(p. 119).

iv) Cause- “It is typically expressed by a prepositional phrase with a complex preposition that represents the reason for which a process takes place, and what causes it.”(p. 120).

v) Contingency- “It is usually expressed by a prepositional phrase such as *in the absence of*, *in default of*”(p. 120).

vi) Accompaniment- “Accompaniment is a type of circumstantial adjunct which represents the meanings and corresponds to the interrogatives *with whom?*, and *who/what else?*, but not *who/what?*”(p. 120).

vii) Role- “It is typically expressed by the usual preposition namely *as*, and complex prepositions with this function are *by way of*, *in the role/shape/guise/form of etc*”(p. 120).

viii) Matter- “Matter is a type of circumstantial element equivalent to the verbiage. It is related to verbal processes, which are described, referred to, narrated etc. Matter is expressed by prepositions such as *about*, *concerning*, *with reference to* and sometimes *simply*”(p. 120).

x) Angle- “Angle is also related to verbal processes, but in this case to the speaker; it is like *as...says*. The simple preposition used in this function is *to*; it is often expressed by more complex forms such as *according to*, *in the view*, *opinion of*, *from the standpoint of, etc*”(p. 121).

The brief explanation by Nurhasanah (2017) enlightens rich inputs of Circumstantial Adjunct which consists of various categories. She also explains the rigidity of Halliday in detailing his Functional Grammar theory to the extent Circumstantial Adjunct can come into a variety of patterns.

It is noticeable that the Location type of circumstantial adjunct has caused structural ambiguities in the selected newspaper reports. Nurhasanah (2017) mentioned that “Generally, the interrogative forms for indicating circumstantial elements of location are *where?* and *when?* the typical structure is an adverbial group or prepositional phrase;” (p.119). So, the presence of adverbial or prepositional phrases at the end of the sentences in the reports creates the structural ambiguities which then leads to two different interpretations. The presence of prepositional phrases which function as an adjunct explaining time and location commonly leads to a structural ambiguity (Kinanti, 2018). Hence, it is crucial to acknowledge all the types of Circumstantial Adjunct to ensure this study were conducted precisely in order to achieve its research objective.

Apart from that, the application of Circumstantial Adjunct theoretical framework by Halliday (1994) has been used commonly in previous textual analysis basis research. El-Falaky (2016) applied SFG in his study on the discourse analysis involving text messages of Egyptian mobile operators. One of his major findings stated the use of Circumstantial Adjunct by the senders to describe their products from different elements such as time, manner, etc. In other words, the use of Circumstantial Adjunct in text message is common and probably it can be one of effective tools in a text or sentence construction. Nurhasanah (2017) conducted her study on the use of Circumstantial Adjunct in a literary text ‘The Taming of the Shrew’, one of the tales written by Shakespeare. In her study, the finding found the major use of Manner type of Circumstantial Adjunct with the percentage of 30.5%. This has clarified that the use of Circumstantial Adjunct in a literary text is also applicable and not limited to a specific type of text. To add on, the latest study done by Dewi (2021) on the analysis of Circumstantial Adjunct in the news headline of Jakarta Post has convinced more the relevance of the theoretical framework application in a textual analysis basis research. Dewi (2021) mentioned 42.57% of the Location type of Circumstantial Adjunct was used in the news headlines of Jakarta Post. This

shows that Circumstantial Adjuncts are widely used in a newspaper writing and it indicates the reliability of conducting this study which used newspaper articles as the main source of collecting the data.

From the previous studies mentioned, it can be concluded that the application of Circumstantial Adjunct theoretical framework is very widely utilized in a textual analysis basis research. It is not limited to any specific types of a text but rather any texts are eligible to be applied using the theoretical framework. Moreover, textual analysis research using Circumstantial Adjunct is still relevant even in the present year. Hence, it is convincing for this study to be conducted by using the theoretical framework, Circumstantial Adjunct since it is applicable to any kinds of text including a newspaper report. Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that this study only focused on one specific type of Circumstantial Adjunct; Location.

3. Research Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design that implemented a content analysis method. The method has been considered applicable for this research since the data needed were extracted from a newspaper (text), the New Straits Times. “Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use” (Krippendorff, 2019, p. 24). This study involved textual material and it is recommendable for any textual material basis researches to apply qualitative design as the trustworthiness can be obtained through the application of this research design (Elo et. al, 2014). Senom (2019) explained that content analysis allows a researcher to conduct a study that involves textual material substantially and identify relevant patterns and structures of its content according to the research objectives. Also, the use of qualitative content analysis is one of the most chosen research methods in text data analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

For research sampling, the researcher used purposive sampling technique because the newspaper brand selected was based on his judgment that NST is widely known Malaysian English newspaper and the oldest newspaper still in print (Alkaff & McLellan, 2017), so it was regarded as the best source to collect the data. Palinkas et. al (2013) explained that “Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest” (p.1). Additionally, the newspaper articles selected were based on Malaysian Covid-19 issues since they grab the attention of most readers to read the news. Ripolles (2020) claimed that Covid-19 has brought back interest of those who read less news to read the news eagerly in order to get updates with the pandemic issues. Therefore, by analysing the content of newspaper articles related to Malaysian Covid-19 issues, it stresses more the relevancy of this study.

The data were collected from New Straits Times newspaper articles from December 2020 and January 2021 editions. The ambiguous sentences were extracted from the news articles related to Malaysian Covid-19 issues by adopting a framework suggested by Halliday (1994) which focuses on the Circumstantial Adjuncts-Location. Then, they were explained descriptively by applying Syntax bracketing technique proposed by Yule (2014) to elaborate on how the Circumstantial Adjunct-Location has caused the sentences to become ambiguous.

4. Findings & Discussion

Based on the analysis made on the NST Covid-19 newspaper articles from 1st December 2020 to 31st January 2021, there were 56 ambiguous sentences that can be extracted. The structural ambiguities analysed were all caused by the location type of Circumstantial Adjunct. The following explanations show the operation on how the ambiguous sentences caused by the Circumstantial Adjunct-Location.

1) *On Nov 27, Senior Minister (Security Cluster) Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob said all foreign workers must undergo Covid-19 screening.* (1st December 2020, p.6)

a)

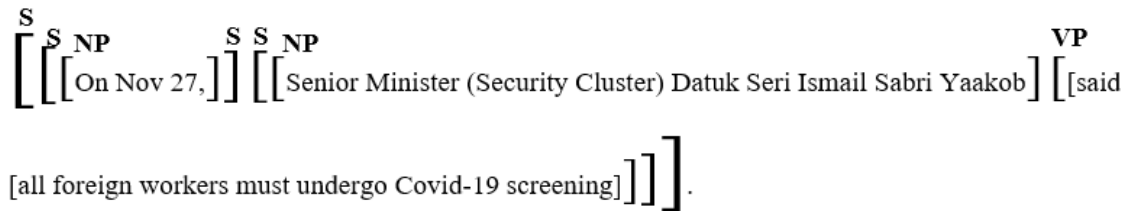


Figure 1

The Figure 1 explains how the first possible meaning that can be illustrated from the ambiguous sentence is the prepositional phrase ‘On Nov 27’ illustrates the timeline of the event that took place. Meaning that, both verbs in the sentence are affected by the prepositional phrase ‘On Nov 27’. Hence, the first possible meaning is Datuk Ismail Sabri Yaakob’s statement and foreign workers screening were done on the same date.

b)

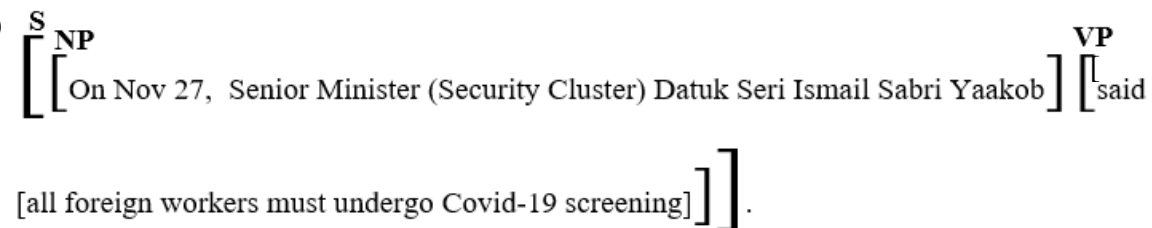


Figure 2

On the other hand, the second possible meaning for the ambiguous sentence is the prepositional phrase ‘On Nov 27’ can be referred to the statement made by the senior minister, Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob on the obligation of foreign workers to undergo Covid-19 screening.

2) *The index case of this cluster displayed symptoms and was found to be positive on Dec 7.* (12th December 2020, p.6)

a)

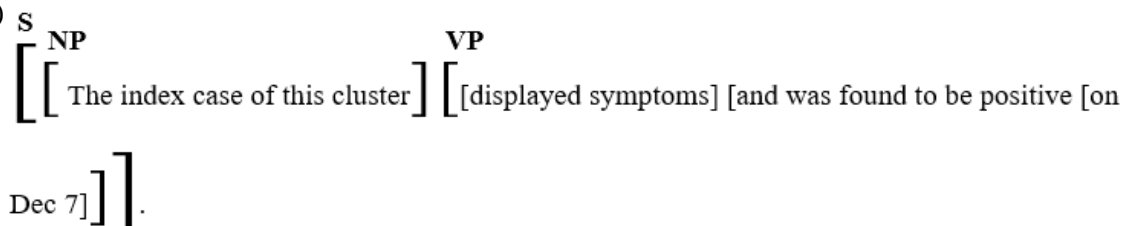


Figure 3

The Figure 3 shows that the ambiguous sentence illustrates two possible meanings which firstly is the index case was found positive ‘on Dec 7’. The prepositional phrase ‘on Dec 7’ explains the verb phrase nearest to it ‘was found to be positive’.

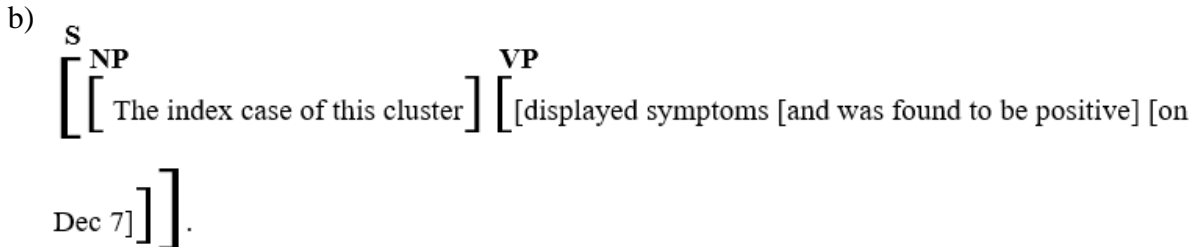


Figure 4

The second possible meaning of the sentence can be illustrated from the Figure 4. It explains that the prepositional phrase ‘on Dec 7’ indicates the time marker of both verb phrases in the sentence, ‘displayed symptoms’ and ‘was found to be positive’. Hence, it explains that the index case was both found positive and its symptoms displayed on the same date.

3) *Police are tracking down a Covid-19 patient who fled from Tampin Hospital on Wednesday.* (1st January 2021, p.15)

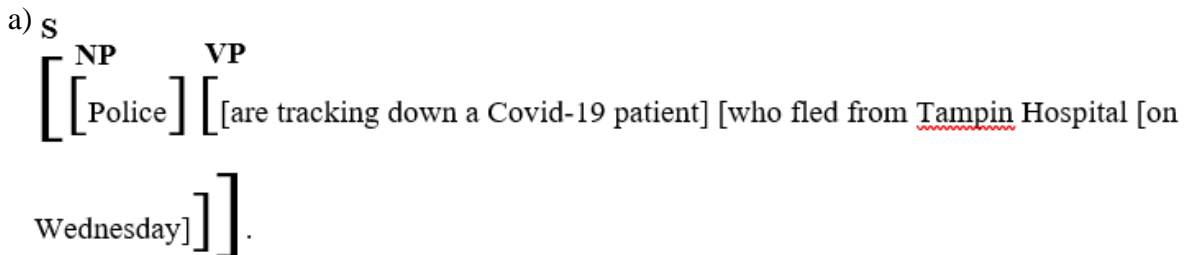


Figure 5

The first possible meaning that can be illustrated from the Figure 5 above is the Covid-19 patient fled from Tampin Hospital on Wednesday. The prepositional phrase ‘on Wednesday’ explained the time marker of the relative clause ‘who fled from Tampin Hospital’.

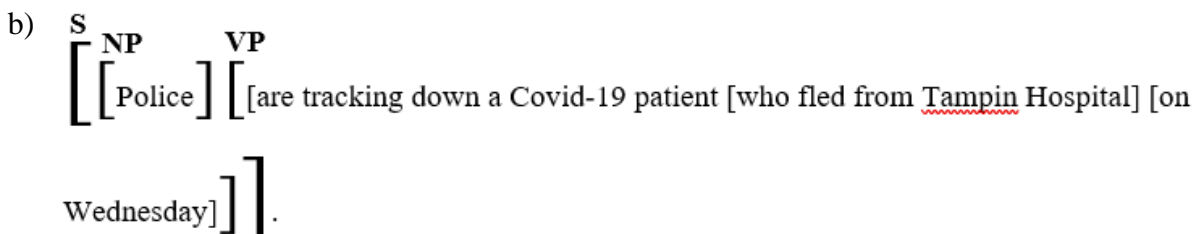


Figure 6

However, for the second possible meaning, Figure 6 illustrates that the prepositional phrase ‘on Wednesday’ explains the timeline of clause ‘Police are tracking down a Covid-19 patient’. It means that, the day when the police were tracking down the patient was on Wednesday.

4) *He said the authorities detained 31 illegal immigrants and confiscated five vehicles on Thursday at 110 road blocks.* (2nd January 2021, p.5)

a)

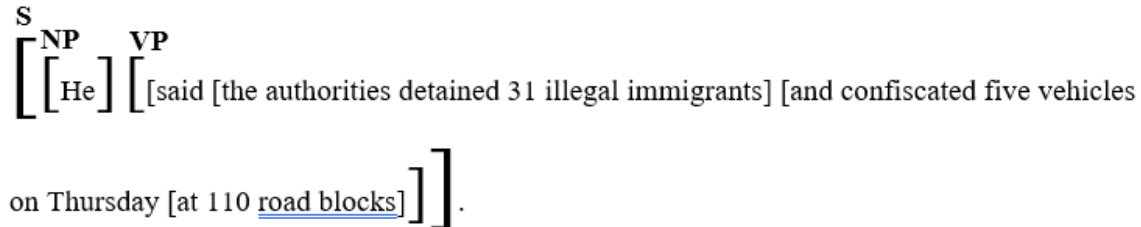


Figure 7

The Figure 7 explains the first possible meaning of the ambiguous sentence which five vehicles were confiscated at 110 road blocks. It means that the prepositional phrase ‘at 110 roadblocks’ explains the location of the event (verb phrase) ‘confiscated five vehicles on Thursday’ took place.

b)

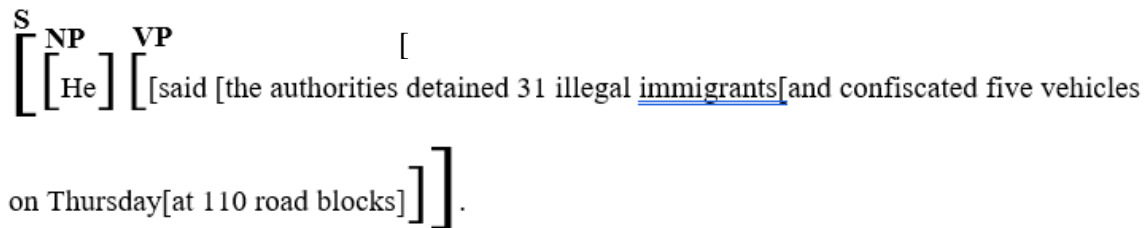


Figure 8

On the other hand, based on the Figure 8, it explains that the prepositional phrase ‘on Thursday at 110 roadblocks’ gives some information regarding the location and the timeline of the verb phrases ‘detained 31 illegal immigrants and confiscated five vehicles’. Hence, it can be understood that both events; the detention of illegal immigrants and the confiscation of the vehicles took place on the same day, ‘Thursday’ and at the same location ‘110 road blocks’.

5) *On recoveries, he said 3,638 patients had been discharged yesterday.* (26th January 2021, p.4)

a)

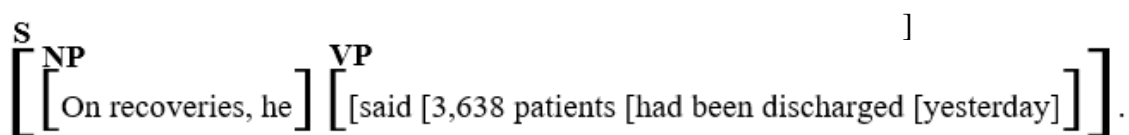


Figure 9

The Figure 9 explains the structural ambiguity caused by the presence of the adverb ‘yesterday’ which functions as a circumstantial adjunct that explains the timeline of the verb ‘said’ in the sentence. Hence, the first possible meaning is ‘he’ made a statement on the patients discharged was ‘yesterday’.

b)

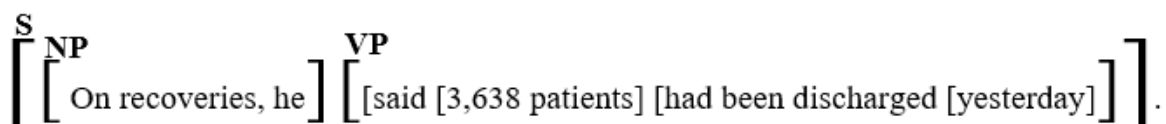


Figure 10

The second possible meaning that can be illustrated from the Figure 10 above is when the adverb 'yesterday' explains the noun phrase '3638 patients had been discharged'. It gives a meaning that the timeline of the patients who had been discharged was 'yesterday'. 'Yesterday' becomes a time marker which functions as a circumstantial adjunct that gives additional information on when the event took place.

It can be discussed that the 'location' type of circumstantial adjunct may cause structural ambiguities in Covid-19 newspaper articles. The use of adjunct in the news contents is to elaborate the information of the main idea of the news. This syntactic complexity is crucial in news writing as it is part of news writing skills to ensure readers get the intensive idea from the news they have read. Tolockho and Boomgaarden (2018) mentioned that the good quality of a newspaper depends on the amount of use of complex syntactic structure. However, this sometimes has been overlooked by the journalist to the extent the overwhelming information can lead to structural ambiguities in their news writing. From this study, it depicts the real phenomenon of the use of adjunct in giving extra information regarding the news that has actually created ambiguities in the sentence structures. This is supported by Dewi (2021) who claimed that the long sentences constructed in news writing have eventually invaded readers from comprehensive reading due to the length of sentences that lead to structural ambiguities and misunderstanding. Therefore, it is crucial for a journalist to be careful in choosing the proper sentence structure to avoid a lack of quality in their news writing.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study found that there were structural ambiguities in the selected NST newspaper reports caused by Circumstantial Adjunct-Location. It is interesting to note that the use of ambiguity in news writing has been part of journalistic writing style to sell their story to the public. "Some journalists, intentionally or unintentionally, employ ambiguity when constructing news headlines" (Khalifa, 2018, p.3). According to Wei and Wan (2017), there are three types of news headlines that can be categorised which are accurate, ambiguous and misleading and also proposed specific definitions. It is factual that the misleading one will drive readers to poor quality of reading due to misinterpretations they can make. Hence, regardless of news headlines or news content, it is crucial to be aware of structure ambiguity because it will be slowly affecting the quality of communication that will lead to the misunderstanding and eventually an argument among readers.

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