

MA GRAMMAR / WEEK 09

Complexity and ambiguity

MA Grammar · Week 9
Quirk et al., Chapter 14

Does a longer sentence have more depth?

Constructed contrast

Rana read, Noor annotated, and Ali checked the examples.

Rana said that Noor knew why Ali left.

Today's goals

Represent depth and attachment.

Compare controlled rewrites.

Audit an annotation decision.

Depth measures nesting, not word count

Root level 0: Rana said [...].

Level 1: that Noor knew [...].

Level 2: why Ali left.

Coordination adds conjoins at the same level; embedding adds a level.

Different devices can combine

Constructed example

We hope [to explain [why the method failed]] and [to test an alternative].

Relations to record

Two coordinated infinitival complements.
An embedded finite question within the first.
Shared matrix subject we.

Placement changes processing

Earlier clause

Although the sample was small, the pattern was consistent.

Later clause

The pattern was consistent although the sample was small.

Attachment produces different readings

Constructed example

The tutor said that the seminar was cancelled after the audit.

Two possible attachments

After the audit modifies said.

After the audit modifies was cancelled.

A rewrite is a controlled experiment

Change one disputed relation at a time.

Preserve participants, tense, negation and modal force.

State which reading the revision selects.

Check whether the revision adds a causal claim that was absent.

Theory check · Define your coding unit

Token: one occurrence in retained sentence context.

Code: construction, host, form, function and uncertainty.

Keep the same inclusion rule across both registers.

Disagreement is evidence for refining the rule, not a reason to hide difficult cases.

Workshop 1 · Structure before counting

1. We know that the tutor expects to finish soon.
2. We read the abstract, and we checked the examples.
3. The tutor said that the student left after the seminar.
4. Although brief, the report explains why the method changed.

Bracket clauses, calculate depth and identify a real ambiguity.

Drill key · State the convention

Counts and depths

- 1: three clauses; maximum depth 2.
- 2: two main clauses; depth 0.
- 4: three clauses; depth 1.

Attachment in item 3

After the seminar can locate the saying or the leaving.

The two finite clauses give depth 1 under either reading.

Workshop 2 · Compare two annotations

Text · constructed

The tutor said that the student left after the seminar.

Two coding records

Analyst A: after the seminar → said.

Analyst B: after the seminar → left.

Neither records an alternative.

Audit what the disagreement represents

Both analysts found the same two finite clauses.

They disagree about one adverbial's attachment.

Record both candidate hosts if context does not resolve them.

Keep initial codes separate from the final adjudicated code.

Text laboratory · A research abstract

Constructed teaching data

- 1 We examined how students requested feedback in two seminars.
- 2 Because the recordings were brief, we treated the findings as exploratory.
- 3 The tutor reported that students revised the drafts after the meeting.
- 4 We hope to establish whether the pattern recurs when a different task is used.

Analyse, rewrite and audit

Bracket the clauses and record the depth of line 4.

Give two attachments for after the meeting in line 3.

Rewrite line 3 once for each reading, preserving time rather than adding cause.

Two coders agree on 4 of 5 attachment decisions. Calculate raw agreement and state a limitation.

Suggested analysis of the abstract

Clause structure

1: embedded finite how-question.
2: causal adverbial plus main clause.
4: to establish → whether...recurs →
when...is used; depth 3.

Attachment and audit

3: reporting time or revision time.
Agreement: $4 \div 5 \times 100 = 80\%$.
Five decisions are too few for a strong
reliability claim.

Challenge · An impressive percentage?

Claim: 80% agreement proves that our categories are reliable.

Name the sample size and what was compared.

Identify one piece of information needed to assess the claim.

Exit response · One test, one limit

The lecturer explained that the timetable changed after the review.

Give two readings and a rewrite that selects one.

State what the original sentence leaves unresolved.

Plan the mini-investigation

Choose two English registers and one construction.

Specify a sampling rule and a target of 20–30 tokens.

Draft coding categories, including uncertain cases.

Next week: Quirk et al., §§16.1–17.