

A Syntactic Analysis of Dangling Modifiers in English

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Abstract

The dangling modifiers is a descriptive phrase that implies an actor different from the sentence subject. This paper tries to shed light on dangling modifiers by analyzing it syntactically. It aims at specifying the doer of the action as the subject of the main clause and substituting the phrase that dangles into a complete introductory clause.

This work is presented in four sections: section one is an introduction which subsumes the problem investigated, objective of the study, limits of the study and the procedures.

Section two is devoted to some studies that are related to this paper.

Section three deals with types of dangling modifiers. It includes dangling modifiers in participial phrases constructions, dangling modifiers in infinitive phrases, dangling modifiers in gerund phrases constructions and dangling modifier in elliptical clauses.

Section four includes the conclusions and recommendations.

1. Introduction

When a sentence starts with an introductory phrase like a participial phrase, an infinitive phrase, a gerund phrase or an elliptical clause, it should logically agree with the subject of the

sentence, else the modifiers will dangle and the sentences take on unintended meaning. Example:

- (1) a- Shaving in front of the steamy mirror, the razor nicked Ali's chin.

This sound as if the razor was shaving in front of the mirror. What the writer meant was not the razor but Ali. The subject Ali must be added. The correct sentence must be:

- b- Shaving in front of the steamy mirror, Ali nicked his chin with the razor.

The reader may face two problems when he reads the sentence, the first one is that the subject of the sentence is not the doer of the action expressed by the opening phrase or clause for example:

- (2) a- Taking the exam, the room was so stuffy that Nada almost fainted.

Here, the subject Nada must follow the modifier taking the exam. Thus the correct sentence must be:

- b- Taking the exam, Nada found the room so stuffy that she almost fainted.

The second problem takes place when a phrase is too far from the part it goes with. Example:

- (3) A former baker, the owner of the bakery ask Waleed about the use of old machines.

The correct sentence will be:

- b- The owner of the bakery ask Waleed, a former baker, about the use of old machines.

This study aims at making the implied actor in the modifying phrase explicit in order to make the meaning clear and avoid ambiguous sentences.

This study hypothesizes that:

1. The reader distinguishes the subject of the sentence easily.
2. The phrase at the beginning of the sentence could possibly describe this subject

This study is limited to four types of dangling modifiers: participial phrases, infinitive phrases, gerund phrases and elliptical clauses.

The procedures of this study are:

1. Providing a theoretical survey of the literature related to syntax of dangling modifiers.
2. Presenting dangling modifies in relation to grammatical function.
3. Discussing examples related to dangling modifiers.

2. Literature Review

Ebest et al. (2003: 263) think that the dangling modifier is a reduced clause which does not have the same subject as the main clause does.

Hale (2005: 1) mentions that the dangling modifier is "a word or phrase that modifies a clause in an ambiguous manner, because it can be applied to either the subject or the object of the clause."

Zwicky (2005: 2) describes dangling modifiers as expressions that are likely to induce difficulties in comprehension by hearers/readers. Besides that, Nelson (2009: 2) finds that the dangling modifier is one that doesn't seem to apply to anything in the sentence. She says "Dangling modifiers can take our sentences unintentionally humorous." Example:

- (4) Covered with melted cheese, we ate the pizza. (ibid)

Maimon et al. (2007: 423-424) point out that dangling modifiers is an error in sentence structure whereby a grammatical

modifier is associated with a word other than the one intended or with no particular word at all.

The writer tries to modify the subject in a sentence but word order makes the modifier modifies an object instead. The ambiguity can make difficulty in understanding a sentence. Example:

(5) Shifting at a sidewalk café, all sorts of interesting people, passed by.

The modifying clause sitting at a sidewalk café is supposed to describe the behavior or the narrator, but grammatically it seems to apply to nothing in particular or to the all sorts of interesting people.

3. Types of Dangling Modifiers

3.1 Dangling Modifier in Participial Phrases Construction

Blue (2000: 1) mentions that "a participle is considered as one of a class of verb forms known as verbal". Verbals are derived from verbs but because they are nonfinite verb forms, they cannot serve as the predicate of a clause. Participles come in two tenses, present and past. The present participles look identical to the gerund. The only difference is the way they are used in the sentence. We can differentiate between them by describing a gerund as the ing form of a verb used as noun such as running, while the present participle is the ing form of a verb used as a modifier. Example:

(6) Are those new running shoes?

Sabin (2001: 556) mentions that participle is a word that stays alone as an adjective or it combines with auxiliary verbs to form different sentences. Example:

(7) Coming round the mountains, Nada saw more mountains.

The participle coming modifies the noun Nada.

Maimon et al (2007: 429) define a participial phrase as a phrase that includes a participle but not a subject. It is usually

separated from the main clause of the sentence by one or more commas. It should be right after their subject.

A participle which does not have a subject in the sentence is called dangling participle. Example:

(8) a- But when smoking in public places, great consideration is needed. (Henessay, 1992: 321).

Here, the participial phrase when smoking in public places is dangling. It has no subject in the sentence. We can correct it by saying:

b- But when smoking in public places, smokers should show greatest consideration.

Dangling participle phrase occurs at the beginning of a sentence. Example:

(9) a- Falling a sleep often in the class, the final exam proved difficult for Nada.

The participle phrase here Falling a sleep often in the class is dangling because it is impossible for a final exam to fall a sleep at all. This phrase doesn't actually modify the subject of the sentence. We can correct it by saying:

b- Falling a sleep often in the class, Nada found the final exam to be difficult.

Dangling participle also occur at the end of the sentence. Example:

(10) a - Our vacation passed happily, swimming and playing tennis. (Waldhorn & Zeiger, 1954: 75).

This sentence is dangling because our vacation did not swim or play. We can correct it by saying:

b- We passed our vacation happily, swimming and playing tennis.

Clause (2005: 142) thinks that the participle phrase is said to be a dangling modifier if the doer of the action expressed in the participle has not been stated. Example:

- (11) a- It was difficult for Ali to hear the announcements waiting for the train.

The sentence is dangling because the announcement were not waiting for the train. We can correct it by saying:

- b- While waiting for the train, Ali found it difficult to hear the announcements.

3.2 Dangling Modifiers in Infinitive Phrases

Sabin (2001: 557) thinks that "An infinitive plus its object and modifiers; may be used as a noun, and adjective, or an adverb. Examples.:

- (12) It is good to see those numbers again. (Noun)

- (13) The decision to join a worshipping group requires some motivation (adjective).

- (14) He resigned to take another position (Adverb).

Maimon et al (2007: 630) mention that a finite phrase consists of an infinitive or to form of a verb, to do, to be, to live. It functions as a subject, object complement, or direct object in a sentence. Example:

- (15) To complete his work is his greatest ambition (subject).

- (16) Ahmed made many efforts to complete his story for his publishers. (object complement).

- (17) He worked to finish his program. (direct object).

An infinitive phrase that is attached to either no word in a sentence or to the wrong word is called dangling infinitive. Example:

(18)a- To impress the interviewer, punctuality is essential.

The phrase to impress the interviewer is dangling because if we ask (who is to impress the interviewer?) The answer is not punctuality but you. Thus we should add the subject. The sentence will be:

b- To impress the interviewer, you must be punctual.

In other words, when a sentence begins with a subjectless adverbial infinitive, we can expect that the subject of the main verb will function as the subject of the introductory infinitive. If this does not happen, then the infinitive is considered to be dangling. Example:

(19) a- To make his lesson more interesting, coloured pictures were used by the teacher.

This sentence is wrong. It states that the coloured pictures were used the teacher, rather than the person. The implied actor is not mentioned in the sentence at all. To correct this sentence we can say:

b-To make his lesson more interesting, the teacher used coloured pictures.

3.3 Dangling Modifiers in Gerund Phrases Construction

Maimon et al (2007: 630) state that a gerund phrase seems like a participial phrase because it uses the ing form of the verb. But gerund phrases always function as nouns, not adjectives. Example:

(20) Selling requires special skills.

If the agent of an introductory phrase is other than the subject of the sentence, the phrase is considered an unacceptable dangling element. Sabin (2001: 555) defines dangling gerund as "a prepositional-gerund phrase that is attached either to no word in a sentence or to the wrong word."

Here are the examples of dangling modifier in gerund phrases construction:

(21) a- After seeing the dentist, his teeth stopped aching. (Waldhorn & Zeiger, 1954: 76).

When we look at this sentence and ask who saw the dentist? The answer here is not his teeth but Ali. Thus, we can correct this sentence as follow:

b- .After Ali saw the dentist, his teeth stopped aching.

Another example:

(22)a- On looking out the window, a beautiful scene met his eyes.

The phrase a beautiful scene met his eyes is not correct. Thus, the sentence is dangling because a beautiful scene cannot meet his eyes, only eyes can see a beautiful scene. We can correct it as follow:

b- On looking out the window, his eyes met a beautiful scene.

3.4 Dangling Modifier in Elliptical Clauses

Waldhorn & Zeiger (1954: 50) mention that in elliptical clause "The subject and the predicate of a clause may be omitted when they can be supplied from the context." Example:

(23) While he was eating, he kept talking relentlessly.

The elliptical clause is considered dangling when the omitted subject differs from the subject of the main clause. Example:

(24)a- While Ahmed was still a boy, his ambition was to become a doctor.

This sentence is dangling because his ambition cannot become a doctor. We can correct it by saying:

b-While he was still a boy he had the ambition to become a doctor.

(25)a- When four years old, my family moved to Mosul. (Razzak, 2000: 14)

This sentence is dangling because the reader cannot understand who is in four years old, the omitted subject here does not correspond with the subject of the main clause. We can correct it by saying:

b- When I was four years old, my family moved to Mosul.

1. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

This study has come up with a set of conclusions:

2. The reader cannot distinguish a descriptive phrase that properly modifies the subject of the sentence from one that implies a different actor. As a result, he does not recognize the dangling modifiers.
3. The reader tries to connect the modifying phrase with the actual subject, the result may be humorous as well as confusing.
4. There are two ways of correcting a dangling modifier. One of them is putting the subject within the opening word group. The other one is placing subject right after the opening word group.
5. Many dangling construction may be eliminated by using the active rather than the passive form of the verb.
6. The dangling elements will distract and slow the attentive reader. The reader will have to work more than necessary.
7. Many dangling modifiers remain confusing to read even if they are syntactically unambiguous because written and spoken word are processed directionally.

4.2 Recommendations

1. It is recommended that syllabus designers, textbook writers, teachers and students should pay attention to such problem and try to overcome such obstacles when teaching and learning grammar.
2. Since illustrations of danglers in good authors are plentiful, since writers of textbook themselves slip into the forbidden construction and since the dangler is an easily understood ellipses, textbooks must show by examples when the subject may or may not be omitted.

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تحليل نحوي للمُعَدَّلات الملازمة في اللغة الانكليزية

ملخص البحث

المُعَدَّلات الملازمة هي عبارة وصفية تتضمن فاعل مختلف عن فاعل الجملة. يحاول الباحث في هذا البحث أن يسلط النظر على المُعَدَّلات الملازمة و ذلك بتحليلها تحليلًا نحويًا. يهدف هذا البحث الى تحديد الشخص القائم بالعمل كفاعل للعبارة الرئيسية وإبدال العبارة التي تتعلق بعبارة تعريفية كاملة.

يقدم هذا العمل في اربعة أجزاء: الجزء الأول هو مقدمة عن البحث تتضمن المشكلة التي درست، أهداف الدراسة، حدود الدراسة والفرضيات.

يخصص الجزء الثاني للدراسات السابقة التي تتعلق بهذا البحث.

يتضمن الجزء الثالث أنواع المُعَدَّلات الملازمة و هي عبارات اسم الفاعل ، العبارات الغير محددة، عبارات اسم المصدر و عبارات الحذف.

يتضمن الجزء الرابع النتائج والتوصيات. وقد تبين عدم قدرة القارئ على تمييز العبارات الوصفية التي تتضمن الفاعل الرئيسي من العبارات الأخرى التي تتضمن فاعل مختلف مما يؤدي إلى الغموض و الارتباك و تشتت الذهن و الصعوبة في الاستيعاب.