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Editorial note:

Faculty of Humanities Teaching and Learning Colloquium 2025 (T&L Colloquium 25) hosted by the Faculty of Humanities, North-West University, South Africa took place in Rustenburg, South Africa, from September 9-11, 2025, with a rich and stimulating programme filled with inspiring keynotes, contributed papers, workshops and panels. This bi-annual colloquium brings together educators, researchers, students, policymakers, and community practitioners. The main theme of T&L Colloquium 25 was “Reimagining the Future of Humanities Knowledge and Pedagogy: Decoloniality, Technology and the Social Justice Imperative.” This special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Society And Education (JCSE)* contains Thirteen (13) selected papers presented at T&L Colloquium 2025. Selected contributions come from within and outside of South Africa and address a wide range of issues in humanities, decoloniality, technology and the social justice.

The introductory contribution by Tshifhiwa Ignatia Mashau provides an overview of research findings and trends related to the colloquium’s focus on the role of digital humanities and technology in supporting decolonial scholarship. The author’s article which titled “Decolonising digital health promotion in African higher education institutions: A justice-oriented literature review” develops a Digital Health Justice Framework to guide equitable and culturally responsive digital health promotion in African HEIs. A research article by Eyitayo Francis Adanlawo and Mpho Chaka follows with a discussion of emerging career pathways that foreground wellbeing and sustainable development, positioning humanities graduates as key contributors to sustainable and ethical futures. The authors identify novel professional opportunities in sectors including community engagement, policy development, and social innovation. They advocate for an expanded employability paradigm that integrates humanistic knowledge with sustainable development goals, underscoring the vital role of humanities disciplines in shaping resilient, inclusive societies.

The article by Nurain Aboo Mohammed evaluating the use of QR codes as a form of assessment in teaching and learning. The author confirms the potential of QR codes as both a useful and effective medium for assessment in educational settings. Samuel Chukwudi Agunyai and Victor Ojakorotu article “Analyzing the effect of the disconnection between the curriculum and Africa’s indigenous Knowledge on effective learning” argues that Africans’ realities still encompass indigenous knowledge on various levels that can be incorporated into the continent’s school curricula.

Other articles include: Examining the Impact of Digitalization and Inequality Post Covid -19 In Africa by Phuti Ignatius Moloto and Rosinah Pillay; The Omitted Conversation: Incorporating Teacher Union Scholarship for A Transformative Educational Agenda Within the Educational Landscape. Thembinkosi Zwane Trevor, David Matsepe; Examining factors behind an achieving institution: A scenario of secondary schools in Limpopo Province by Ngwako Solomon Modiba; Assessing the role of the COVID-19 catch-up recovery programme on learner performance in EFAL by Vele RJ, Tshikota and TM Badugela; Entrepreneurial Education and Sustainable Entrepreneurship Advancing Sustainable Development Goals in South Africa Through Small Businesses by Lazarus, M. and Beharry-Ramraj, A; Mitigating Grammatical

Ambiguity In English Prepositional Phrases At Dzindi Circuit Secondary School, South Africa by Farisani Thomas Nephawe; Exploring the Usage of Metadiscourse in Research Proposals Written by Honours Students by Mzamani Steven Khosa and Ernest Kwesi Klu; and Population Ethics and its implication for Developing Countries by Onwe Peter S. and Kelechi Johnmary Ani. Policy Windows and Missed Opportunities: An Institutional Analysis of How Teacher Unions Influence (or fail to influence) National Educational Policy Formulation by Zwane Thembinkosi Trevor, Matsepe David.

Editor,

Prof. Mpho Chaka

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Table of Content

1. Decolonising digital health promotion in African higher education institutions: A justice-oriented literature review Tshifhiwa Ignatia Mashau	6
2. Emerging Career Pathways for Humanities Graduates: Integrating Wellbeing and Sustainability Mpho Chaka & Eyitayo Francis Adanlawo	26
3. Evaluating the Use of QR Codes as a Form of Assessment in Teaching and Learning Nurain Aboo Mohammed	38
4. Analyzing the effect of the disconnection between the curriculum and Africa's indigenous Knowledge on effective learning Samuel Chukwudi AGUNYAI & Victor OJAKOROTU	55
5. Examining the Impact of Digitalization and Inequality Post Covid -19 in Africa Phuti Ignatius Moloto, Rosinah Pillay	69
6. Examining factors behind an achieving institution: A scenario of secondary schools in Limpopo Province Ngwako Solomon Modiba	78
7. Assessing the Role of the COVID-19 Catch-Up Recovery Programme on Learner Performance in EFAL Vele RJ, Tshikota SL & TM Badugela	95
8. The Omitted Conversation: Incorporating Teacher Union Scholarship for A Transformative Educational Agenda Within the Educational Landscape. Thembinkosi Zwane Trevor, David Matsepe	112
9. Entrepreneurial Education and Sustainable Entrepreneurship Advancing Sustainable Development Goals in South Africa Through Small Businesses Lazarus, M. and Beharry-Ramraj	131
10. Mitigating Grammatical Ambiguity In English Prepositional Phrases At Dzindi Circuit Secondary School, South Africa Farisani Thomas Nephawe	152
11. Exploring the Usage of Metadiscourse in Research Proposals Written by Honours Students Mzamani Steven Khosa and Ernest Kwesi Klu	165

12. Population Ethics and its implication for Developing Countries
Onwe Peter S. and Kelechi Johnmary Ani 177
13. Policy Windows and Missed Opportunities: An Institutional Analysis of How
Teacher Unions Influence (or fail to influence) National Educational Policy
Formulation
Zwane Thembinkosi Trevor, Matsepe David 187

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MITIGATING GRAMMATICAL AMBIGUITY IN ENGLISH PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES AT DZINDI CIRCUIT SECONDARY SCHOOL, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Even though tenses are an essential component of the English language, tense substitution poses a significant challenge for non-native English speakers. This study investigated a strategy to mitigate grammatical ambiguity in English prepositional phrases at Dzindi Circuit Secondary School, South Africa. Grounded by Noam Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar and Oyinlola's Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, this study adopted a qualitative approach to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The study population consisted of 99 Grade 11 English First Additional Language (FAL) learners in the 2025 academic year. Sixteen (16) learners were randomly selected for this study. Data were collected using a closed-ended questionnaire, as it provides predetermined responses to facilitate informed decision-making. They were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 29, due to its new interpretative enhancements. Before the 'syntax surgery strategy' was utilised, learners were incapable of mitigating ambiguity in English prepositional phrases, minimising. However, after using this strategy, learners' performance was outstanding. The study's implications call for the use of a 'syntax surgery strategy' to mitigate grammatical ambiguity in English prepositional phrases, which have consistently been challenging many literary scholars. However, it was limited by sample and time constraints. Future researchers can further study the current topic. This study argues for the frequent use of the syntax surgery strategy in this regard.

Keywords: *Communication, syntax surgery strategy, tense substitution errors*

Introduction

In the study of English, it is not always simple to pass the intended message from the addressor to the addressee. Satpute and Agrawal (2023) postulate that understanding the structure and function of sentences is vital to enhancing English competence. However, it is often challenging for users whose first language is not English because different words have identical meanings, and corresponding words and sentences can convey different meanings (Dai, 2023). When sentences convey multiple meanings.

English users may easily produce ambiguous sentences (Satpute & Agrawal, 2023). Grammatical ambiguity entails the interpretation of propositions in various ways, deviating from the anticipated everyday use of English. Nevertheless, if English-language users follow appropriate language rules in areas such as concord, word order, tenses, inflexion and word classes, grammatical ambiguity can be mitigated (Eddai & Guerdjikova, 2023).

Yang et al. (2023) argue that the development of ambiguity in English grammar arises from poor word choice when insufficient attention is paid to the

selection of appropriate phrases. As readers with dissimilar backgrounds may interpret sentence structure differently to determine whether it is ambiguous, addressees compare various sentential interpretations (Satpute & Agrawal, 2023). Consequently, a connotative rather than a denotative context may contain multiple meanings (Shishkin & Ortoleva, 2023), often resulting in distorted meanings produced by the speakers or writers to listeners or readers. The poorly constructed English sentences, such as 'The teacher said on Tuesday she would give an examination' (Chung et al., 2023), can be interpreted as suggesting that 'on Monday the teacher told the class about the examination', or as the intent to provide the examination on Tuesday. In this regard, it is evident that poor sentence structure can lead to grammatical ambiguity in English (Ababou et al., 2023).

Jumaa and Tawfeq (2023) assert that structural ambiguity in English poses numerous challenges to most non-native English language users. Therefore, understanding meaning in this regard requires listeners or readers to establish the structural representation and interpretation carefully (Xiang et al., 2023) to counter the development of grammatical ambiguity. Grammatical ambiguity may readily arise from interlanguage and intralanguage transfer (Oyinlola, 2023). Additionally, Dai (2021: 4) claims that ambiguity often develops in areas including phonetics, vocabulary, adjectival phrases, adverbial phrases, comparative sentences, similar verb forms, parallel parts, and unclear negative centres and grammatical elements.

In the prepositional phrases, the sentences: '*Naho* washed the plates that were in the sink' and '*Naho* washed the plates that were in the sink' have different interpretations. The first sentence may suggest that this boy washed the plates

while he was in the sink (adverbial phrase) rather than on the table (adjectival phrase). However, the second sentence suggests that *Naho* washed the plates when standing by the sink. According to Nippold (2023), ambiguous prepositional phrases can be mitigated by carefully analysing sentence structure and placing them at the beginning of the sentence (Lefevere, 2023).

Furthermore, Ababou et al. (2023) posit that grammatical ambiguity results from unfamiliarity with most English propositions, namely, the presence of two or more connotations within sentences, word order, inflexion, and verb tenses (Eddai & Guerdjikova, 2023). In this regard, Bi (2023) claims that grammatical ambiguity occurs across areas of both spoken and written communication. Bi (2023) asserts that connotative contexts may contain multiple meanings, leading to an interpretation of the intended meanings rather than the denotative ones.

Numerous studies have investigated the development of grammatical ambiguity in English. However, limited information has been obtained to examine the development of grammatical ambiguity in the use of prepositional phrases. Ababou et al. (2023) studied the effect of grammatical ambiguity on newspaper headlines in The Jakarta Post. They identified many ambiguous grammatical elements, including noun phrases, verb phrases, adjectival phrases, and prepositional phrases. Béghin and Markovits (2023) analysed ambiguous sentences in English using statistical and counterexample reasoning. The results of the current study indicated that statistical ratiocinators were more aware of the errors committed than the latter ratiocinators (Béghin & Markovits, 2023).

Jumaa and Twfeq (2023) investigated structural ambiguity in selected Arabic literary texts, specifically in two novels,

namely, Frankeshtine in Baghdad and Only the Pomegranate Tree. They found that structurally ambiguous structures and expressions were heavily represented. However, Hussain and Mehdi (2023) conducted a study to assess the effectiveness of a syntax surgery strategy in helping learners overcome challenges in understanding the structure of English sentences. The results of this study established that the syntax surgery approach is practical, as it can identify the connections between prepositional phrases and clauses in complex sentences and understand and retain the rules of English sentence structures (Hussain & Mehdi, 2023).

Satpute and Agrawal (2023) investigated the ambiguity in pragmatics. The result of this study was that detecting ambiguity in English grammar is a vital tool for machine translation. Valentino (2023) explored grammatical ambiguity across various meanings in English for Business and Professional Communication, employing a syntactic approach, and identified multiple interpretations. Similarly, the study by Xiang et al. (2023) examined the impact of WH-scope ambiguity on English use among Mandarin learners. The results of this study indicated that they made several ambiguous statements. Although many studies have been conducted to mitigate ambiguity in English grammar, such as prepositional phrases, previous scholars have reported limited findings. Additionally, no study has been conducted at the Dzindi Circuit secondary school in Limpopo Province, South Africa.

Literature Review

English prepositional phrases and sentence structures can become ambiguous, misinterpreted, and misunderstood by second language (L2) learners due to multiple interpretations (Béghin & Markovits, 2023). For example,

the verb 'bark' refers to the dog's noise when confronting an intruder or the tree's outer cover. Therefore, grammatical ambiguity may arise from multiple interpretations (Satpute & Agrawal, 2023). In other latitudes, Dai (2021) argues that phonology, vocabulary, pragmatics, and syntax contribute to grammatical ambiguity in sentences. Nonetheless, the latter is more intricate than the other ambiguous areas (Jumaa & Tawfeq, 2023).

The occurrence of syntactic ambiguity in adjectival phrases occurs in multiple ways in sentence constructions, for example, 'I saw a big brick house'. The adjective 'big' is attributively employed to qualify the noun phrase, such as 'brick house'. Additionally, it qualifies the noun 'house', or any adverbial phrases. Furthermore, in the sentence 'The master promised to pay them tomorrow'. The adverbial of time, such as 'tomorrow', requires a careful application in a sentence because it seems 'tomorrow' never exists. In the adverbial clause 'I hate Tom more than *Mulalo*', the suggestion is that the speaker does not detest *Mulalo* more than Tom. Additionally, grammatical ambiguity occurs in the sentence 'Moving a car is dangerous', where the listener can infer multiple interpretations: 'it is dangerous' to move a car or that 'driving the vehicle' can be unsafe.

In English, grammatical ambiguity can occur when the conjunction 'and' is used in sentences. For example, in the sentence 'The man visited the patient and his wife', it can be inferred that after visiting the patient, the man also visited the patient's wife, or 'the man' visited both his wife and the patient. Also, grammatical ambiguity can occur in the sentences 'I don't teach because it is easy' and 'I teach English, not as English is easy' (Jumaa & Tawfeq, 2023). The former sentence is grammatical, whereas the latter is ungrammatical. The negative forms comprise 'operator 'do' + negative word

(not/n't)' to negate this sentence, and a sheer placement of a negative word (not/n't) after the 'noun English' instead of putting the operator 'do'+ not in the beginning of the verb 'teach'. Thus, the 'scope of negation' or its 'centre' can influence the ambiguous interpretation of sentence structures.

Prepositional phrases can be the source of grammatical ambiguity, especially when using prepositions such as 'by', 'in', 'at', or 'on'. Additionally, the preposition 'with' can cause grammatical ambiguity, as in 'Tom is coming by bus with his brother' because the multiple interpretations can be Tom's brother who is coming by bus with him, or both Tom and his brother are coming by bus. In the Tshivenda, one of the South African indigenous languages (Nyetanyane & Masinde, 2022), such a distinction does not exist. Therefore, such a difference between Tshivenda and English can lead to language transfer when Tshivenda learners construct English sentences.

The preceding discussion is synonymous with the sentence 'He killed a man with a gun', where someone used a gun to kill the man or the man who had a gun was killed by him. In the Tshivenda language, the preposition 'by' and the word 'with' mean the same thing: *nga*. In this situation, the Muvenda student can easily misinterpret any proposition due to the lack of disparity between the prepositions 'by' and 'with' as in the Tshivenda sentence *O vhulaha mbava nga tshigidi*, which is interpretable or translatable into *He killed a thief using a gun*. However, in English, the sentence 'He killed the thief with a gun' shows an unnatural sound and might mean that the thief was killed standing next to the gun, or someone clubbed the thief with a gun, but not as much as a murder weapon. For this reason, there is a high chance of constructing ambiguous sentences.

In the Tshivenda language, the preposition can mean *na* ('with') as in *U khou vhuya na khonanai yawe* (He is coming home with a friend). Therefore, the sentence 'He is coming home with a bus' (*U khou vhuya hayani nga bisi*) is permissible in Tshivenda as in *Ndo vhona ndau nga lito/ito lthihi* or *Ndo vhona ndau I rena lito/ito lithihi* meaning 'I saw a lion using my one eye', 'I saw a one-eyed lion. The idiomatic expression *Vha/Ni songo tshimbila nga mulomo, vha/ni tshimbile nga milenzhe*, meaning 'Never walk with your mouth, walk with your feet is permissible in the Tshivenda language, although it is full of humour. In Tshivenda, this sentence advises or warns the referent to be cautious and not to gossip.

Furthermore, since English and Tshivenda are two distinct languages, the rules of each language do not apply to the other. For example, in Tshivenda, the subjects 'he' and 'she' are not always distinct. The speaker and listener infer the intended meaning to get a clear interpretation. Both the subjects 'he' and 'she' (U) are used in the present or present continuous tenses. Again, the same subjects (O) are used with the simple past, present perfect, and past perfect tenses, causing no grammatical ambiguity. However, the English two subjects do not mean the same thing and cannot be used interchangeably. Additionally, each sentence contains only one possible meaning (Lap, 2023) to avoid grammatical ambiguity. In essence, the Vhavenda speakers of English are likely to commit grammatical ambiguity. However, Eddai and Guerdjikova (2023) advise that the meaning of a word or phrase with a single interpretation and an accurate use of an expression of time and age are requirements to avoid grammatical ambiguity.

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in Noam Chomsky's (1978) Transformational Generative Grammar and Oyinlola's (2023) Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis.

Transformational Generative Grammar Theory

Transformational Generative Grammar posits that English sentences comprise surface and deep structures. The surface structure concerns the relationships among the several parts of the sentence and their linear arrangements. The deep structure, on the other hand, entails the grammatical relationships that underlie the surface structure and cannot be directly observed from the surface structure alone. If a surface structure has more than two sentences with deep structures simultaneously, grammatical ambiguity occurs (Ilut & Schneider, 2023). This theory indicates that an individual is born with innate, unrefined and unconscious knowledge that requires refinement and development. Additionally, it highlights that certain grammatical elements can be studied to ensure grammatical sentences are unambiguous (Yadav & Yadav, 2020) and reveals the knowledge that native English speakers employ when forming grammatical sentences.

Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis Theory

The contrastive analysis hypothesis posits that English L2 learners transfer knowledge from their first language (L1) to L2 when constructing meaningful sentences, and that some L2 structures are more challenging to acquire than others. Oyinlola (2023) postulates that when two languages and cultures differ, learning a second language (L2) becomes more difficult. However, when they are similar, learning becomes easy. According to Oyinlola (2023), when learners encounter

the structural patterns of the newly learnt language, they deviate from the standard way of using the target language. In most cases, learners transfer some grammatical elements from their L1 to L2.

Syntax Surgery Approach

Proposed in 1998 by Herrell, the syntax surgery approach mitigates the development of grammatically ambiguous sentences by organising sentences into spoken or written strips, with components that are not grammatically ambiguous (Khaleel & Mohammed, 2022). In so doing, Grade 11 English FAL learners can recognise the development of grammatically ambiguous sentences and be competent in English. To use the syntax surgery approach effectively, it is advisable to identify prepositional-phrase ambiguity, give learners sentences to identify grammatical ambiguity and put them in their books, reposition the words into permissible grammatical constructions, and reaffirm learners' L1 knowledge of English-language structure through correct sentence constructions.

Furthermore, the teachers are required to use pertinent sentences with similar strips for learners to read aloud, and the lesson timing does not disturb rapport between teachers and learners (Kahan et al., 2023). Eventually, Grade 11 English FAL learners develop a syntax model that helps them identify tasks they cannot understand, and the teacher sporadically provides them with instructions (Kim, 2023) to mitigate grammatical ambiguity when dealing with the prepositional phrases.

Underpinned by Noam Chomsky's (1978) Transformational Generative Grammar and Oyinlola's (2023) Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, the objectives of this study were to identify grammatical ambiguity in English prepositional phrases at Dzindi Circuit

Secondary School, South Africa. Also, the further objective was to determine the extent of ambiguity in the use of prepositional phrases by Grade 11 English FAL learners at Dzindi Circuit Secondary School, South Africa. The study answered the research questions, namely, 1) What type of grammatical ambiguity in prepositional phrases is made by Grade 11 English FAL learners at Dzindi Circuit Secondary School, South Africa? 2) To what extent are English FAL learners at Dzindi Circuit Secondary School, South Africa, ambiguous when using the prepositional phrases?

Although the scholars such as Ababou et al. (2023), Béghin and Markovits (2023), (Béghin & Markovits, 2023), Jumaa and Twfeq (2023), Hussain and Mehdi (2023), Satpute and Agrawal (2023), Valentino (2023), and Xiang et al. (2023) have limited findings in the mitigation of grammatical ambiguity in English prepositional phrases in Dzindi Circuit, South Africa, they are contributions to the development of this study are invaluable. Thus, the researcher aimed to close the gap identified in the literature review of the current study.

Method

The study adopted a qualitative approach as it enables an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, which has never been researched in this manner (Bandari et al., 2023). Besides, it involves collecting and analysing non-numerical data. An exploratory research design was employed, as it investigates research questions that have not been previously studied (Carter et al., 2023). Moreover, it is utilised when the question under investigation is new, when the data collection process is challenging, to obtain a general idea and answer a specific question (Li et al., 2023). Still, there is no prior knowledge or established paradigm for learning it. Sixteen participants were

purposely selected from 99 Grade 11 English FAL learners at Dzindi Circuit Secondary School, South Africa, based on the researcher's preference. The inclusion criteria for participants were having been taught English FAL for more than seven years (Peng et al., 2023).

Several procedures were implemented to enhance the qualitative trustworthiness (Riazi et al., 2023) of the data gathered from the written essays, to identify the development of ambiguity in the use of English prepositional phrases. To boost credibility, the findings were shared with the study participants to obtain feedback that clarified and confirmed their experiences (Libman, 2023). In this study, the enhancement of transferability was reflected in the participants' prejudices, conventions, and viewpoints, thereby improving research development and discoveries.

To comply with the ethical considerations in the present study, the researcher obtained permission to survey the Limpopo Department of Education, the Manager of the Dzindi Circuit, the principal of Muthamaro Secondary School, and the parents/guardians of the underage participants at the time of the investigation. The researcher considered ethical issues such as informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, and potential physical and psychological harm to participants. The researcher provided a comprehensive description of the study's items (Shufutinsky, 2020), including the study's aim, research questions, data collection methods, and analytical measures, thereby enhancing dependability. A critical reflection on the participants' expectations and standards, which influence interpretations and research processes, was conducted to strengthen the confirmability of the findings. The potential for bias was minimised by recognising and addressing prejudices in the study.

A qualitative research approach was employed to collect descriptive and conceptual findings through questionnaires, interviews, and observation (Khoa et al., 2023), as well as to explore ideas, explain results in narrative form, and collect stories and experiences from individuals. A pilot study was conducted on seven learners who were not part of the study group to test the reliability of the research instrument. Data were collected from the composition titled 'A visit to Kruger National Park' to enable a display of the learnt skills for essay writing.

The researcher defined the research, selected an appropriate data-collection method, established an interview guide, took no sides and permitted all the learners to share their stories. The researcher then ensured that one team member was around when analysing the results. Robust deliberations and discussions were based on the participants' written compositions. The following two steps were employed to answer the first question regarding the use of prepositional phrases by these learners: identifying prepositional-phrase ambiguities and classifying grammatical ambiguities. This step was followed by a description of grammatical ambiguity and an explanation of how to address it, in response to the second question. Additionally, the researcher collected data, reduced it, displayed it, and drew conclusions.

A thematic analysis technique was used to analyse transcripts of learners' written essays. The codes were sorted, organised, scrutinised, and prepared for interpretation. Delve Thematic Analysis Software was used to analyse the data due to its flexibility across various strategies (Gulsia & Yadav, 2023). An open coding system was employed to name new codes and to create impressions for specific portions of the data. The researcher applied line-by-line coding, placing the codes close

to the data in an open, spontaneous manner; kept the labels short, simple, and precise; and focused on actions.

The researcher defined codes by applying the comment function, created a coding system consisting of prefixes, symbols, and colours to group the same codes, identified themes, facilitated the coding procedure, and interrogated the data (Botchwey et al., 2023) collected from the written essays. Furthermore, he graphically presented the coding linkage in networks when the abstraction level increased gradually, diarised the steps taken in a memo to increase transparency and facilitated analytical procedures for narrative writing.

Results

The researcher answered the questions, namely, 'What type of grammatical ambiguity in prepositional phrases is made by Grade 11 English FAL learners at Dzindi Circuit Secondary School, South Africa?' and 'To what extent are English FAL learners at Dzindi Circuit Secondary School, South Africa, ambiguous when using the prepositional phrases?' The researcher analysed data to clarify learners' grammatical ambiguity in the prepositional phrases. The findings of this study concurred with Valentino's (2023) suggestion that grammatical ambiguity is often caused by a deviation from the expected standards, such as poor words, phrases, or clauses, by the speaker or writer during communication. Therefore, it was found that Grade 11 English FAL learners created grammatical ambiguity, leading to the misinterpretation of the preposition 'with' due to the transfer of knowledge from L1 to L2, as suggested by Oyinlola (2023) and Valentino (2023).

In addition, it was discovered from the written compositions that there is no correspondence between English and Tshivenda regarding prepositional phrases.

For instance, no distinction between English and Tshivenda ‘he’ and ‘she’ occurred in line with the preposition ‘with’ (*nga* and *na*) in propositional phrases. However, such a situation differs from English. Hence, learners commit language transfer errors from their L1 to L2 because,

by Grade 11, English FAL learners, as suggested by Oyinlola (2023). In this study, the following are examples of prepositional-phrase ambiguities made by Tshivenda-speaking Grade 11 English FAL learners in their written essays.

Table 1

A sample of ambiguous English prepositional phrases

English Prepositional Phrases	Tshivenda interpretation
1. The boys went to the park on foot.	<i>Vhatukana vho ya pakhani nga/na milenzhe.</i>
2. She eats porridge with her hands.	<i>U la vhuswa nga/na zwanda.</i>
3. The lion killed a hunter with a gun.	<i>Ndau yo vhulaha muzwimi nga tshigidi.</i>
4. I saw a baboon with <i>maforonkiki</i> .	<i>Ndo vhona pfene nga/li rena maforonkiki.</i>
5. We visit the park with bus.	<i>Ri dalela phakha nga/I rena bisi.</i>
6. He cleans the car with a broom.	<i>U tanzwa goloi nga/na luswielo.</i>

Data visualisation in this table is presented in a 7-row, 2-column format. The top rows contain English prepositional phrases and their Tshivenda interpretations. In the first column, there are six questions, and in the right column, six Tshivenda interpretations. In Table 1, there is a prepositional ambiguity in the use of the preposition ‘with’ represented by Sentence 1: ‘Boys went to the park with feet’. In English, ‘boys’ walked to the park on foot. In Tshivenda, the meaning is that the boys had feet and went to the park with them. In this regard, the prepositional phrase suggests that the learners’ grammatical ambiguity was caused by language transfer from Tshivenda to English. However, applying the syntax-surgery approach enabled learners to prove their understanding of unambiguous sentences, such as ‘Boys went to the park on foot’. The finding is congruent with Valentino’s (2023) suggestion that non-native Grade 11

English FAL learners experience ambiguity in prepositional phrases when attempting to correct appropriate sentences.

In the Tshivenda language, the sentence ‘Boys went to the park with feet’ can be transformed into *Vhatukana vhoya phakhani nga milenzhe* or *Vhatukana vho ya phakhani na milenzhe*, which means either that the boys used their feet when going to the park, or that the boys took their feet with them when going to the park. The cause of this grammatical ambiguity may be language transfer by Grade 11 English FAL learners, as suggested by Oyinlola (2023).

In Sentence 2, grammatical ambiguity was introduced into ‘She eats porridge with her hands’, specifically meaning that the ‘lady’ used her hands rather than a knife and fork to eat the porridge. In addition, this can be interpreted as meaning that the

lady in question did not use her mouth to eat the porridge, but rather her hands; or, on the one hand, the lady was eating porridge, and on the other hand, her hands ate the porridge. Applying the teachers' syntax surgery approach enabled learners to become grammatically competent in English. The finding supports Béghin and Markovits (2023), who indicate that Grade 11 English FAL learners construct ambiguous sentences due to differences between their L1 and the English they are learning.

The direct translation of the Tshivenda sentence translates into *U la vhuswa nga/na zwanda*, which highlights the language transfer from L1 to L2. The finding supports Satpute and Agrawal's (2023) suggestion that language users from different language backgrounds use prepositional phrases differently, thereby causing grammatical ambiguity. However, using the syntax-surgery approach enabled learners to construct appropriate English sentences. The result differs from Hussain and Mehdi's (2023) suggestion that the syntax surgery approach enables Grade 11 English FAL learners to identify the connections between prepositional phrases and clauses in complex sentences and understand the rules regarding sentence construction.

In Sentence 3, the development of grammatical ambiguity took place because the prepositional phrase was used grammatically. For example, the sentence: *'The lion killed a hunter with a gun' has multiple interpretations. It suggests that the lion mauled a hunter despite the hunter holding a gun. The grammatically relevant answers should have been 'The lion killed a hunter who had a gun' or 'Although the hunter had a gun, he was killed by a lion'.* This competence in English resulted from the application of the syntax surgery approach. The finding is congruent

with Dai's (2021) suggestion that in prepositional phrases, ambiguity in grammar can occur when Grade 11 English FAL learners construct English sentences.

In Tshivenda, the sentence 'The lion killed a hunter with a gun' means that *Ndau yo vhulaha muzwimi nga tshigidi*, or *Ndau yo vhulaha muzwimi na tshigidi* in the Tshivenda language, which means that the lion killed the hunter using a gun. The finding supports Nordquist (2020), who suggests that grammatical ambiguity in prepositional phrases develops from language transfer made by Grade 11 English FAL learners. The finding is congruent with Oyinlola (2023), who suggests that inadequate learning and overgeneralisation may lead to ambiguity in the prepositional phrases.

In Sentence 4, 'I saw a baboon with binoculars, there is a grammatical ambiguity because the meaning is that the speaker used binoculars to see a baboon, or a baboon had binoculars, and the man saw it. In this situation, the use of the preposition 'with' (*nga* or *na*) in Tshivenda influenced the learners to transfer knowledge from L1 to L2. The learners should have written the correct sentences: 'Using binoculars, I saw a baboon' or 'I saw a baboon when I was using binoculars.' In this regard, the syntax-surgery approach enabled learners to produce unambiguous sentences. When translated into Tshivenda, the sentence 'I saw a baboon with binoculars would mean *Ndo vhona pfene nga maforonkiki* or *Ndo vhona pfene li re na maforonkiki*. The result concurs with Jumaa and Tawfeq's (2023) suggestion that grammatical ambiguity occurs in Grade 11 English FAL learners whose mother tongue is not English.

Sentence 5, 'We visit the park with a bus,' shows grammatical ambiguity in

prepositional phrases, as it means that they visited the park using a bus or they visited 'the park' and 'the bus.' In this situation, a grammatically correct sentence should have been 'We visited the park by bus.' Nonetheless, in the Tshivenda language, the sentence 'We visit the park with a bus.' can be translated into *Ri dalela phakha nga bisi* or *Ri dalela phakha irena/ine ya vha na bisi*. Hence, Tshivenda has multiple interpretations that convey similar meanings to its listeners or readers. The syntax surgery approach, in this regard, enabled learners to construct appropriate sentences. The finding is inconsistent with Hussain and Mehdi's (2023) suggestion that the syntax surgery approach enables learners to identify connections between prepositional phrases and clauses in complex sentences, thereby mitigating the development of grammatical ambiguity (Oyinlola, 2023).

In Sentence 6, 'He cleans the car with a broom', grammatical ambiguity occurred because it means the boy used the broom to clean the car or the boy cleaned the vehicle that had a broom inside it. This situation can be ambiguous, and lead to misinterpretation or miscommunication in English. In this regard, the syntax-surgery approach enabled learners to become competent in English, producing grammatically correct sentences such as 'The cleaner used the broom to clean the car'. The result of this study is not in line with the suggestion made by Ababou et al. (2023) that grammatical ambiguity in prepositional phrases may cause miscommunication. In addition, the result is consistent with Valentino's (2023) suggestion that Grade 11 English FAL learners may experience grammatical ambiguity in prepositional phrases.

Correspondingly, the Tshivenda language does not approve the use of the sentence 'He washes the car with a broom' translated into *U tanzwa goloi nga luswielo*

or *U tanzwa goloi na luswielo* (He/She washes the car with a broom). However, the sentence construction '*U tanzwa goloi na luswielo*' reveals an element of insanity in the person who is cleaning both the car and a broom meant for cleaning the vehicle. The finding supports Bi's (2023) suggestion that grammatical ambiguity is a persistent phenomenon across morphology, phonology, semantics, and syntax. The cause of the grammatical ambiguity in the prepositional phrase 'with' might have been Oyinlola's (2023) inter-lingual transfer, intra-lingual transfer, or ignorance of rule restrictions.

Conclusion

Although grammatical ambiguity has long been a challenge for FAL learners, especially those with limited exposure to English usage, the present study aimed to investigate its development in prepositional phrases. Moreover, it sought to address the research questions posed in the current study. For example, in sentences 1-6, it is evident that language transfer has consistently been a problem for FAL learners. The differences between the grammar of English and Tshivenda played a role in the transfer of knowledge from L1 to L2.

In addition, it was evident that although many learners face prepositional-phrase ambiguity in their written compositions, the use of the syntax surgery approach helped them mitigate the difficulties Grade 11 English FAL learners experience in this regard. For example, learners performed outstandingly in both English and Tshivenda. Hence, the identified approach is indispensable for mitigating grammatical ambiguity in prepositional phrases. The ambiguity in this regard might have been caused by the difference in syntactic structure between the two languages, interlanguage transfer, intra-language transfer, ignorance of rule restrictions, inadequate learning, a false

concept hypothesised, overgeneralisation, and simplification. Thus, the use of the syntax surgery approach is worthwhile to mitigate grammatical ambiguity development in the use of prepositional phrases, not only to learners at Muthamaro Secondary School but also to all English FAL learners elsewhere.

The present study implies that mitigating Grade 11 English FAL is indispensable in teaching and learning. It is recommended that learners frequently

practise appropriate sentence construction, as endorsed by the syntax surgery approach, to produce ambiguity-free sentences. Teachers should encourage learners to study grammatical rules to mitigate ambiguity regarding the use of the preposition 'with'. Future researchers are encouraged to conduct further studies to help reduce the development of grammatical ambiguity among Grade 11 English FAL learners in the Dzindi Circuit, South Africa.

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