

A worldwide study of noun juxtaposition: An instance of overrating ambiguity avoidance

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Ambiguity and efficiency have been important factors in explaining the use of a certain linguistic form (e.g. Hankamer 1973; Levshina 2022, respectively). Languages tend to use more markers to avoid ambiguity, while they tend to use fewer markers to convey their meanings more efficiently. However, they are opposed to each other. When speakers use simpler forms, the listeners can misunderstand their intentions. This paper investigates which is prioritized in the use of a certain linguistic structure: ambiguity or efficiency, through the examination of noun juxtaposition. Noun juxtaposition can be considered the most efficient form in terms of formal length, as it is defined in this study as a form that does not use any formal markings to indicate its function. There are few studies on noun juxtaposition, but Frajzyngier et al. (2002) conclude that noun juxtaposition cannot be used for both predication and modification within a language to avoid ambiguity. Nevertheless, certain languages use noun juxtaposition for both functions:

(1) Sentani predication and modification (Sentanic; Mayer 2021: 63)

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|----------------|---------------|------------|
| <i>Awansi</i> | <i>Jacobus</i> | <i>mænggə</i> | <i>fa.</i> |
| Awansi | Jacobus | girl | young |
| 'Awansi is Jacobus's daughter.' | | | |

(2) Labwor (Niloctic; Heine and König 2010: 30; 61)

a. Predication

| | |
|------------------------------|------------|
| <i>mánón</i> | <i>bòj</i> |
| that | <i>bò</i> |
| 'It is <i>bò</i> vegetable.' | |

b. Modification

| | |
|-----------------|--------------|
| <i>đt</i> | <i>dhákó</i> |
| housewoman | |
| 'woman's house' | |

Thus, this paper examines the role of ambiguity in the use of noun juxtaposition by using a probability sample of 72 languages from 72 genera. All languages in the sample use noun juxtaposition for at least one of the three functions: predication, possession, and conjunction. To avoid geographical bias, the 72 languages consist of 12 languages per macro-area.

Based on this survey, I report six generalizations. There is a strong tendency for predication, with many languages using it for two or three functions. Additionally, noun juxtaposition exhibits several areal features, such as Australian languages using it for both predication and possession and/or conjunction, Papuan languages using it at least for predication, and African languages avoiding its

use for conjunction.

In conclusion, this study suggests that the use of noun juxtaposition should be explained by efficiency (Hawkins 2014: §2.2; Haspelmath 2017) rather than ambiguity. This implies that ambiguity across functions does not significantly influence the use of a certain form. This is consistent with Piantadosi et al. (2012) and Wasow (2015) that ambiguity is not always avoided. Instead, languages tend to prefer simpler forms, resolving ambiguity through other means like context and phonological features

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