Ambiguity avoidance and DOM

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Since a transitive clause has two arguments (A and P), it must be ensured that the hearer will be able to discern which of the arguments should be interpreted as A and P, respectively. Moreover, other potential misinterpretations, such as one NP modifying the other NP – if both are adjacent to each other – or both NPs being coordinated (without a conjunction), should be excluded. There are many ways in which ambiguity avoidance may be implemented in a particular language or even in a particular sentence, with flagging being one of them:

(1) Ambiguity avoidance of P flagging (economy subsumed)
    In a transitive clause, the A and the P argument must be sufficiently disambiguated, e.g. by word order, agreement, voice, world knowledge, and it is only if they are not that there is dedicated P flagging.

A number of researchers have argued that there is only little or no evidence for (Aor P) flagging systems being driven by ambiguity avoidance as defined in (1) cross- linguistically (*inter alia*, Aissen 2003; Malchukov 2008; various papers in de Hoop& de Swart 2008). Levshina (2021) shows on the basis of the large-scale AUTOTYP database that there is no statistically significant effect of ambiguity avoidance observable for flagging because there are only very few languages in which flagging is primarily driven by ambiguity avoidance. Sometimes even in these languages, ambiguity avoidance does not serve the purpose of ambiguity avoidance between A and P alone: a function inherited from the source construction and often some ongoing conventionalization of the most frequent ambiguity avoidance patterns override the discriminatory function to various extents. Having said this, it has been repeatedly suggested that flagging might also serve the ambiguity avoidance, especially if A and P have similarly ranked input (cf., *inter alia*, Comrie 1978, 1989; Dixon 1994; Silverstein 1976; Kibrik 1997). Bossong (1985: 117) even assumed that the emergence of DOM is primarily due to ambiguity avoidance.

In this paper, I will provide qualitative evidence for the claim that ambiguity avoidance does operate across genealogically and areally diverse DOM systems. At the same time, I will also argue that its impact is mostly weakened by other competing processes to which it is subordinate, the effect being that there is only marginal evidence for it in the synchronic distribution.

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