

*Essays for this course should be long enough to deal adequately with the assigned topic. You should sign our petition to protest against the violation of our rights by the government.*

*If you persist in this course of action, all hell is going to break loose.*

### 3.2.2 Referential Ambiguity

**REFERENTIAL AMBIGUITY** arises when a word or phrase could, in the context of a particular sentence, refer to two or more properties or things. Usually the context tells us which meaning is intended, but, when it doesn't, we may choose the wrong meaning. If we are not sure which reference is intended by the speaker, we will misunderstand the speaker's meaning if we assign the wrong (i.e., the unintended) meaning to the word. If someone tells you that Pavarotti was a big opera star, you will have to guess whether *big* refers to *fat* or to *famous*. Sometimes, however, it is the context that creates the ambiguity. If someone is comparing the merits of two universities and says, *It is quite a good university*, the context may not tell us which university is being referred to.

Referential ambiguities are usually easy to spot and, once recognized, are easily avoided. This is especially true in conversation, since we can ask for clarification: *Do you mean that Pavarotti was fat or famous?* Or, if we select the wrong meaning, it will not be long before we discover our mistake: *Oh, I thought you meant he was famous!* There is, however, one type of referential ambiguity that deserves special mention: that between the collective and the distributive use of a term. Most nouns refer to a class of individual objects: *dog*, for example, refers to the class consisting of all dogs, and *book* refers to the class of all books. Usually when we use such nouns we do so in order to say something about each and every member of the class. When we use a term in this way it is being used **DISTRIBUTIVELY**. But sometimes we use terms to say something not about each and every member of the class but about the class as such. When we use a term in this way it is being used **COLLECTIVELY**. Consider the following:

*Our university has a large wrestling team.*

If we interpret *wrestling team* distributively, the statement means that the individual members of the team are large. If we interpret the term *collectively*, the statement means that the team has a large number of members. Usually the context makes it clear whether a term should be interpreted distributively or collectively, but sometimes it does not, and we can mistakenly assume the wrong interpretation.

It is useful to develop the ability to recognize referential ambiguities even when

they are unlikely to cause misunderstandings, for then we are less likely to assume a wrong interpretation inadvertently. Here are some more examples of sentences containing referential ambiguities:

*Tom gave Ted's skis to his sister.*

*Harold told me that he would do it next week.*

*Americans make more telephone calls than Canadians.*

*The government has provided constant funding for post-secondary education over the last three years.*

### 3.2.3 Grammatical Ambiguity

**GRAMMATICAL AMBIGUITY** arises when the grammatical structure of a sentence allows two interpretations, each of which gives rise to a different meaning. A few years ago a British newspaper reported that

*Lord Denning spoke against the artificial insemination of women in the House of Lords.*

The grammar makes it unclear whether it was the speech or the insemination that took place in the House of Lords. This is because the phrase *in the House of Lords* could modify either *insemination* or *spoke*. Of course, which meaning applies in this case is clear despite this ambiguity, but that is not always the case.

Here are a few examples:

*He promised to pay Stephanie and Michael \$50 to clear all the junk out of the basement and take it to the dump.*

*Ashley strode out of the studio with Nikki following her, saying, "I'll never give him up."*

*Daphne decided to quit smoking while driving to New Denver.*

*Jim and I have suffered tremendously; often I wake up in the morning and wish I were dead, and I know Jim does too.*

*Women with babies who attend college encounter all sorts of exceptional challenges.*

### 3.2.4 Use and Mention

Another type of linguistic ambiguity arises through the failure to distinguish between *USING* a word or phrase and *MENTIONING* a word or phrase. Consider the following sentences: