

A DISCOURSE Analysis of Davao City Ordinances: Language Ambiguity in FOCUS

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on the language ambiguities of Davao City ordinances. The forms of language ambiguity, the specific constructs explicating these ambiguities, the problems that may arise from these ambiguities, and the disambiguation techniques were specifically described in this study. The research materials were the 30 Davao City ordinances. Results revealed that the Davao City ordinances contain lexical and syntactic ambiguities. The specific constructs that explicate these ambiguities include hierarchical lexical relations, sense extension, semantic network theory, phraseologism, pro-drop parameter, null T-head in tense phrase, infinitival T-to-C raising, complementizer deletion, non-finite CP deletion, reduced clause analysis, null determiner phrase (Null DP), number misalignment, pronoun-antecedent relationships, implicit morphemes, and orthographic structure. Further, the essential themes on the problems that may arise from these ambiguities include communication breakdown, inconsistency of enforcement, legal confusion, daily life disruption, and inequitable enforcement. Lastly, the methods of disambiguation include definition clarification, word sense disambiguation, literal reformulation, explicit markings, complementizer restoration, correct case selection, structural modification, and orthographic and punctuation correction.

KEYWORDS: *Education, applied linguistics, language ambiguity, Davao City ordinances, disambiguation.*

INTRODUCTION

Serafica (2022) described ordinances as a discourse in written form and she argued that ordinances are open to several interpretations as it may take different meanings to laypeople. Multiple interpretations are possible because of ambiguities that are apparent in the text. In fact, Haber and Poesio (2021) argued that ambiguities in texts, such as in ordinances, pose difficulty for readers to follow and understand. Such a problematic issue calls for

disambiguating the ambiguities of the city ordinances. This ambiguity caused different readings not just among laypeople but also lawyers and lawmakers, thus compromising legal language precision, close reading within the legal profession, and judicial fairness and consistency.

In the Philippines, language ambiguities are apparent in ordinances and republic acts. Bernardo and Albaña-Garrido (2023) examined Republic Act 10913 and found that the ambiguities in both the wording and structure of the law have resulted in confusion for lay readers, contributing to inconsistent enforcement. They found that those areas of ambiguity made the text of the law confusing to lay readers, particularly as to the purpose of the law, its intended meaning, and how it would work in practice. The research indicated that uncertainty about definitions, as well as language ambiguity, opened the door to multiple interpretations and eroded the effectiveness of the law. This lack of clarity in mention of Republic Acts weakens the understanding and compliance of the public on these, therefore there is a need to provide a clearer, more accessible language of the law. In a local scope, Serafica (2022) conducted a discourse analysis on the city ordinances of Tagum City, Davao del Norte. While the study is focused solely on randomly selected five city ordinances of Tagum City from 2000 to 2017, the topics of the chosen legal provisions, including health, women, children, gender and family, affect the findings. The study revealed that city ordinances share the following linguistic features such as persuasive language, which means language that is used to persuade to take certain measures; complex transitive verb groups, which justify or enhance the provisions; affective verbs, which imply the extent of commitment, and responsibility; stance markers, and the lexico-grammatical patterns and the semantics of verbs promote understanding and reinterpretation, the gist of the forms helps to understand the local laws.

The urgency of this study is determined by the possible negative implications of language ambiguity as a significant issue in the process of the development and adoption of Davao City ordinances. Consequently, ambiguity may lead to misunderstanding, errors in the process of understanding of the legal text and increase in violations (Tenedero, 2021). It is in this light that the researcher explored the language ambiguities of ordinances. Given the already established prevalence and implications of ambiguity in law texts like an ordinance, this study contributes to the existing literature by focusing on the ordinances of Davao City.

With the background and the research gap, the researcher sought to answer the following questions: (1) What forms of language ambiguity are evident in Davao City ordinances?; (2) What specific constructs explicate these ambiguities?; (3) What problems may arise from these ambiguities?; and (4) How may these ambiguities be disambiguated?

METHODS

In this qualitative investigation, the researcher utilized a corpus-based approach to qualitative inquiry employing Discourse Analysis as the main framework of investigation. Creswell and Creswell (2022) defined qualitative research as interpretive and naturalistic in approach since it entails the interpretation of wide-ranging information or data. Qualitative research is also expressed through words or statements and accessed through the need to understand concepts, thoughts, or experiences. Qualitative design employing Discourse Analysis, therefore, is deemed fitting for the study since this study will focus on linguistic patterns, themes, and narratives found in ordinances.

The proposed approach involved analysis on the city ordinances of Davao by employing the lexical ambiguities by Boyarskaya (2019) and null constituents by Radford (2004). In this step, the collated ordinances underwent extreme scrutiny to identify the forms of language ambiguities, their specific constructs, and the disambiguation techniques. Next, interviews with Davao City residents were employed to identify their understanding of the city ordinances. This involved interviews with laypeople (e.g.: drivers, students, vendors, police officers, etc.) to assess the public's knowledge of city ordinances and understanding of language ambiguity and the last steps would involve the dissemination and publication of study. In this approach, the participants were highly encouraged to fully express their thoughts in forms of narratives in their own words. This was made to analyze and explore the problems raised by the ambiguities identified in the ordinances.

This qualitative investigation utilized the Davao City ordinances as the source of data. The corpus that were purposely utilized in this study were obtained from the Office of Sanggunian Panglungsod ng Dabaw. The researcher utilized a purposive sampling method. For the corpora in the city ordinances, the researcher purposefully chose ordinances Public Health and Safety, Urban Development and Transportation, Community Welfare, Cultural and Economic Development, Governance and Administration, Food and Environmental Safety. For the participants, the researcher involved 17 participants; 10 of whom were

informants for an in-depth interview and 7 for a focus-group discussion. The inclusion criteria for the participants in the study required them to be 18 years old and above. The researcher ensured that all participants were consenting adults, aging 18 years and above. Furthermore, the participants must also have been residing in Davao City for at least 10 years and they must have a basic understanding of the local ordinances. Additionally, the participants should be willing to discuss their interpretations and experiences of the ordinances.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings on the ambiguities that are evident in Davao City ordinances. The results revealed that there are two general forms of language ambiguities which are the lexical and syntactic ambiguities. The specific lexical ambiguities that were identified in the ordinances were hyponymy, polysemy, and lower-use frequency idioms.

Hyponymy is a relationship between words in which one term (hypernym) represents a broader category, while the other term (hyponym) represents one of the more specific subcategories. The following is one of the identified hyponymy occurrence in the ordinances:

“Funeral parlors and private and public cemeteries are mandated to impose a **family members** only wake and burial...”

The word “family” in the example above becomes a hypernym therefore covering an entire set of people related by blood, marriage, or adoption.

To add, another form of lexical ambiguity is **polysemy**. This occurs when a word has multiple related meanings, usually the result of language evolution and context-dependent meaning. In city ordinances, this makes room for ambiguity, as what a word is meant to convey is not always clear, and different stakeholders, lawmakers, enforcers and the public can have a different understanding of the same word. Below is one example of an occurrence of polysemy in the Davao City ordinances:

“This Ordinance shall be known as the ‘**Drug-Free**’ Workplace Ordinance of Davao City”

The term “drug-free” has multiple related meanings such as free of drugs (including legal drugs or medications), free from drug use, free from drug

influence, or having drug testing policies in place. All the interpretations are interconnected with one another but the only difference lies in the meaning of "drug-free" workplace. This ambiguity within itself makes the reader unable to infer a certain meaning without further clarification or context.

The third type of lexical ambiguity is the **lower-use frequency idioms** which can also create ambiguity because the language used in city ordinances depends on precision and universal understanding. Below is an example of a lower-use frequency idiom identified from the ordinances:

“the prohibited areas for smoking shall constitute **prima facie evidence** of smoking prohibited under this Ordinance”

As seen in the statement above, its use of the term “prima facie evidence”, a legal term that refers to evidence that is sufficient to establish the truth of a claim until it is actually disproven. The term comes from Latin and means “at first sight” or “on its face.” The reference to “prima facie evidence” in the ordinance is potentially confusing to most citizens for whom the legal meaning is foreign.

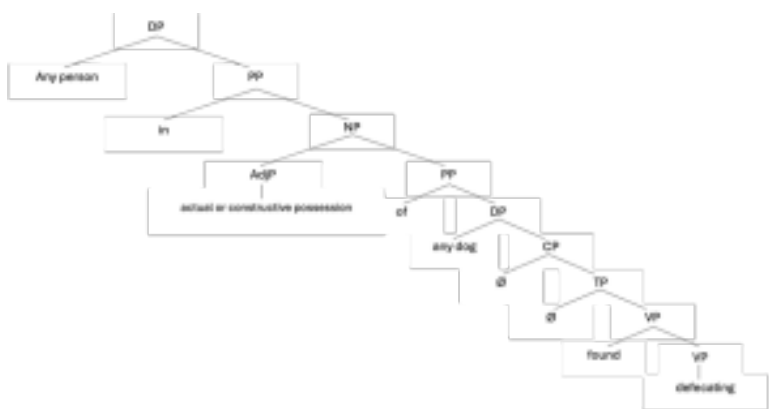
Syntactic ambiguities were also identified in the ordinances. These ambiguities were in the forms of Radford’s (2004) Null Constituents. These null constituents include null subject, null auxiliaries, null T in auxiliariiless finite clause, null T in bare infinitive clauses, null C in finite clauses, null C in non-finite clauses, defective clauses, null determiners, and null plural markers. There were also identified subject-verb disagreement and spelling and punctuation errors.

Null Subject occurs when the subject of a sentence is omitted because it is implied or grammatically unnecessary. Such phenomenon is commonly practiced in inflections of verbs. Null subjects can create ambiguous references and such ambiguity can occur in language where clarity is of utmost importance such as in the case of city ordinances. Below is a sample statement in the ordinances that contains a null subject:

“Any person in actual or constructive possession of any dog found defecating...”

The phrase above poses an ambiguity because to begin with, the phrase could be read to mean that a human (not the dog) was “found defecating.” Also, this might also mean that the dog (not the human) was “found defecating” and is the intended meaning of the text. The omission of the subject leads to the confusion as to who is found defecating, whether it’s “any person” or “any dog”. Figure 1 shows the syntactic structure of the said phrase and as seen in the syntactic structure, the occurrence of the null subject is evident constituting that the subject is omitted in the text, resulting in an ambiguity as to whether the dog or the human is “found defecating”.

Figure 1
Syntactic Structure Illustrating the Null Subject

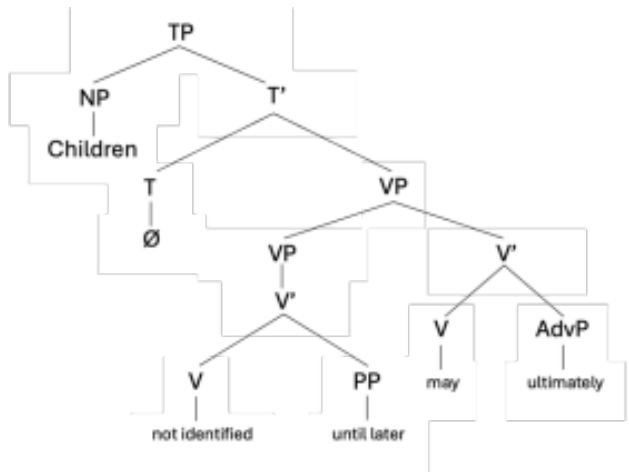


Null T in Auxiliariless Finite Clause. An auxiliariless finite clause has a functional head T (Tense) which is present but not overtly realized with an auxiliary verb which means that the T is syntactically present in the syntactic structure but is phonetically null. One occurrence of Null T in Auxiliariless Finite Clause in the ordinances is found below:

“Children not identified until later may ultimately...”

Evidently, the statement above does not have an overt auxiliary verb, but is nevertheless a finite clause with tense features. The phrase, “Children not identified until later”, as evident in Figure 2, is a reduced passive structure in which the past participle “identified” lacks an overt auxiliary (such as “are” or “were”), which means that T has a syntactic presence that has not been phonologically realized.

Figure 2
Syntactic Structure Illustrating the Null T in Auxiliariless Finite Clause



Null T in Bare Infinitive Clause. In bare infinitive clause, a 'silent' T (Tense) exists in the syntactic structure but does not surface as an auxiliary or voice/inflection on the verb. While tense and agreement features are the ones that determine the temporal reference (T), a bare infinitive clause does not have obvious tense marking and subject agreement (as contrasted with finite clauses). Null T in Bare Infinitive Clause appeared once in the ordinances and this is as follows:

“To assist in identifying successful management schemes
of literacy programs and adopt measures and boost
research and development work to literacy work.”

The statement above includes Null T in a bare infinitive clause, as the verbs "come" and "bring" are in base form without any clear evidence of tense marking or any auxiliary. The phrase "To assist in identifying successful management schemes of literacy programs" is an infinitive phrase where "to assist" is the main verb, but there is no subject or tense marker to indicate when the action happens. The next two verbs, "adopt measures" and "boost research and development work", also appear in base form without a helping verb before them, hence are bare infinitives.

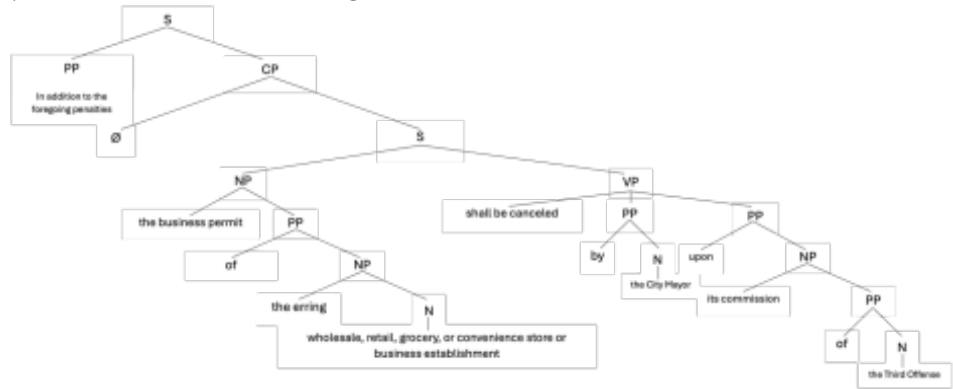
Null C in Finite Clauses. In finite clauses, the Complementizer (C) is the functional head as it introduces embedded structures and provides a link to the main clause. This can be overt where words such as “that” or “whether”

mark the subordination or it can be null, in which case it is present in the underlying structure but is phonetically null. When C is null, the embedded clause is still a full finite clause in its own right and contains tense and agreement features, but is not overtly marked as a complementizer to its main clause. One instance of Null C in Finite Clauses is found below:

“In addition to the foregoing penalties, the business permit
of the erring wholesale, retail, grocery or convenience store
or business establishment shall be cancelled by the City
Mayor upon its commission of the Third Offense.”

The statement above contains a Null C (null complementizer) in a finite clause because it has a complete idea of the word that is left out but still understood. The absence of the complementizer “that” creates uncertainty as to whether the clause being embedded is a direct quote, paraphrase or independent statement resulting in a miscommunication. Figure 3 shows the syntactic structure of the statement.

Figure 3
Syntactic Structure Illustrating the Null C in Finite Clauses



Null C in Non-Finite Clause. The Complementizer (C) is often null in non-finite clauses; that is, it is present in the structure but is not overtly expressed. In contrast to finite clauses which always have an overt or covert subject and are morphologically marked for tense, non-finite clauses have no tense specification, and their interpretation relies on an external element. Below is one instance of Null C in Non-Finite Clause:

"... to discharge or explode, or cause to discharge or to explode, any firecracker, or any other explosive or to use any pyrotechnic device or any such other similar device..."

The statement above has a Null C in Non-Finite Clause since the action words, "to discharge," "to explode," "to use," and "to cause" are in a base form with "to", which means that they do not carry tense independently. In the absence of the complementizer, it is unclear that the actions listed are always illegal or illegal in various situations. This could lead to ambiguity about who the rule applies to and how it is to be enforced.

Defective Clauses. A defective clause is an incomplete sentence that does not have subjects, tense, or a connecting word for the rest of the sentence. This has to be supported by other parts of the sentence to make sense. Defective clauses in ordinances are often ambiguous because they do not clarify who is supposed to do an action or how the action is connected to the rule. Defective clauses appeared once in the ordinances and this is evident below:

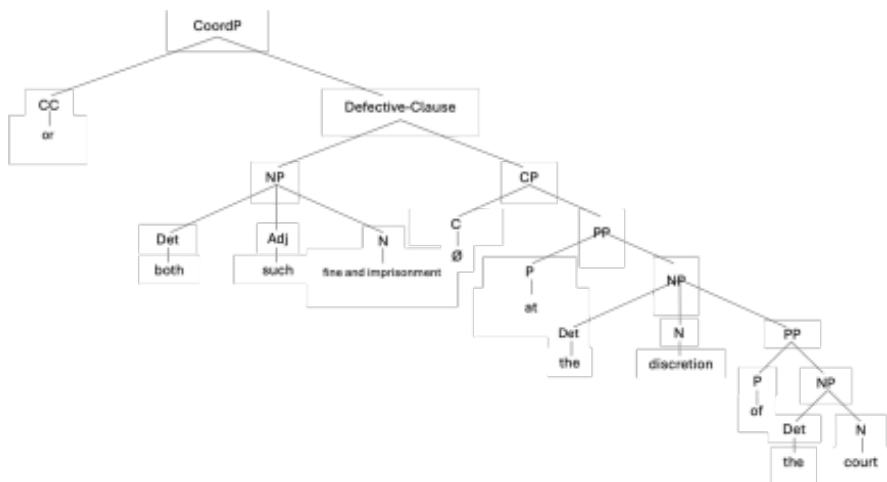
"Any violation of this Ordinance shall be penalized by a fine of One Hundred (P100.00) Pesos for the first offense; Two Hundred (P200.00) Pesos for the second offense; and Three Hundred (P300.00) Pesos for the third offense or a subsidiary imprisonment not exceeding six (6) months in case of insolvency, or both such fine and imprisonment at the discretion of the court."

The phrase "or both such fine and imprisonment at the discretion of the court" is an example of a defective clause because it lacks a clear verb and a subject, making its intended meaning ambiguous. The issue is whether the trial court has to impose both penalties, whether it has full freedom to decide, or whether there are specific conditions for applying both punishments. Figure 4 illustrates the syntactic structure of the defective clause, "or both such fine and imprisonment at the discretion of the court". In the structure, we can also see a Null C which indicates that a complementizer could be explicitly inserted here to make the structure clearer and complete in sense.

Null Determiner. Null determiners are phonetically unpronounced that function in the same way as regular determiners such as "a" or "the". They are present in the structure of a sentence, but since they do not appear, they can make it unclear whether a noun is specific or general. One instance of a null determiner as a form of ambiguity is seen below:

“Entertainment and Other Business Establishment are prohibited from allowing any person in possession of any firearm, ammunition or explosive from entering its business or store premises during business or store hours.”

Figure 4
Syntactic Structure illustrating the Null Determiner



In the above statement, the null determiner is before the statement. "Entertainment and Other Business Establishment." Here, it is not clear whether it refers to all business establishments or just some of them since there is no definite article or an indefinite article such as "an" or "the". **Subject-Verb Disagreement.** In following the structure of grammar, the subject and verb in a sentence must agree in number. This means that if the subject is singular, the verb must also be singular. If the subject and the verb of the sentence mismatch, readers may interpret the provision of the ordinance which may result in difficulty in enforcement. One instance of subject-verb disagreement is below:

"Any person not covered by the exemption who are outside their residences during the curfew hours are in violation of this Ordinance and shall be reprimanded and sanctioned accordingly."

In the statement above, "any person", which is singular, is the antecedent of the relative pronoun "who". However, as seen in the statement, "are" is its verb which creates a mismatch between the subject and the verb. In

standard English grammar, the verb must agree with its antecedent and because “any person” is singular, its verb must be “is” and not “are”. Figure 5 shows the syntactic structure of the statement, "Any person not covered by the exemption who are outside their residences during the curfew hours are in violation of this Ordinance and shall be reprimanded and sanctioned accordingly.”.

Figure 5
Syntactic Structure Illustrating the Subject-Verb Disagreement

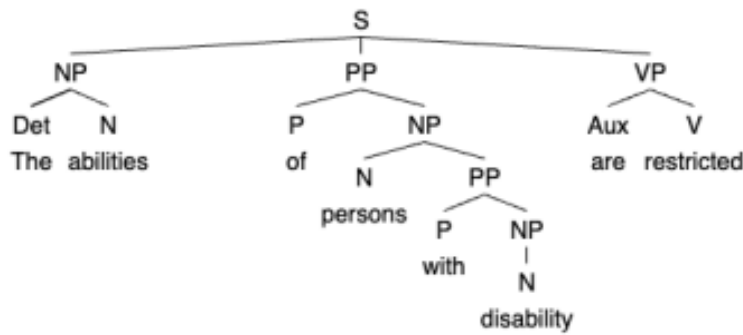


Null Plural Markers. Null plural markers refers to when a word does NOT have a mark indicating it is in plural form. In most languages such as English, we just add the letter "s" or "es" to any plural word. This poses a problem in stipulation of policies in ordinances, as it can cause ambiguity in sentences. One instance of a null plural marker is found below:

“The abilities of persons with **disability** (PWDs) are restricted.”

In the statement above, the phrase, "persons with disability" includes a null plural marker attached to the word "disability." Clearly, this ordinance contains the term "disability" without a clear plural, despite referencing various individuals who are differently disabled. This ambiguity arises from the difference between recognizing the PWDs as having one disability, or many disabilities. Figure 6 illustrates the null plural marker of the word “disability” in the statement, “Likewise, the abilities of persons with disability (PWDs) are restricted.”

Figure 6
Syntactic Structure Illustrating the Null Plural Marker



Specific Constructs that Explicate these Ambiguities

Lexical ambiguities in Davao City ordinances are results from the multiple meanings of words which may result in multiple interpretations and confusion among its intended readers. This discussion examines the specific lexical constructs that contribute to ambiguity in Davao City ordinances.

Hierarchical Lexical Relations are the relationships between one word and other words based on their meanings or classifications (in a hierarchy). An occurrence of hierarchical lexical relations is:

“Funeral parlors and private and public cemeteries are mandated to impose a **family members** only wake and burial ...”

As evident in above, the term “family” is a hypernym, as it represents a large group of related people, while “members” is a hyponym, representing specific people in the group. But we simply do not know where that category ends because the ordinance does not make clear, ideally, who is inside that category. This lacks specificity, however, with the ordinance arguably only applying to parents, spouses, children, and siblings, and a revision making this explicit or even expanding coverage to include extended relatives such as aunts, uncles, and cousins would promote greater clarity to ensure the consistent enforcement of the ordinance.

Sense Extension is another construct that acknowledges that a single term can come to hold multiple related meanings over time. This linguistic

phenomenon occurs when a word or phrase expands beyond its original or most literal meaning to include additional, yet related, interpretations. Notice the following excerpts:

“This Ordinance shall be known as the ‘**Drug-Free**’
Workplace Ordinance of Davao City’.”

In the case of "drug-free", its core meaning being free from drugs has extended to cover various implications. In the example, it originally meant free of drugs, but has multiple interpretations. The term is not specified in the ordinance, giving the term possible multiple meanings. This ambiguity could easily be remedied if the legislative wording specified whether "drug-free" is meant to mean a ban on all substances, requires drug testing, or setting a behavioral standard for employees. Due to the absence of lexical specificity, the readers are left to infer meaning, which could lead to misinterpretation of the ordinance's intent.

Semantic Network which deals with words and their meanings that are organized in a mental lexicon in a network-like structure, with meanings spreading outwards into branches or nodes representing either related concepts. In this case, the some lexical activate multiple semantic nodes, making interpretation dependent on the reader's prior knowledge and context. This construct is evident in the following excerpts:

“...shall be applicable to all persons driving any **motorized**
vehicle in all streets, roads and boulevards...”

The phrase "motorized vehicle" above also sets off a network of related sense, each signaling different classes of motor-powered transportation such as car, motorcycles, scooters, trucks, buses, e-bikes, hoverboard, and even motorized boats. This confusion occurs because the concept of "motorized vehicle" has several interlocking meanings, all of which have a motor as a core characteristic of that type of vehicle.

Phraseologism or also known as as “Fixed Expressions”, involves expressions that are “fixed” in the way that they are used and are referring to come kind of an established meaning in a field. Lower-Use Frequency Idioms are a type of Phraseologism which may not be very frequent or well known, hence their meaning is not transparent to a reader who is not familiar with them. One identified excerpts from the ordinances that contain constructs on

Phraseologism is:

“... the prohibited areas for smoking shall constitute **prima facie evidence** of smoking prohibited under this Ordinance”

The phrase "prima facie evidence" in the statement above also presents the construct of Phraseologism as this is a term that has long been accepted in judicial and legislative contexts. Since “prima facie” is a Latin-origin term used in the legal lexicon, its definition is not readily obvious to laypeople.

Pro-Drop Parameter is a syntactic-principle that permits the omission of a subject in sentences. In pro-drop languages (e.g. Italian), subject pronouns can be omitted when they are understood from the morphology or from context. One of the identified excerpts from the ordinances that contain Pro-Drop Parameter:

“Any person in actual or constructive possession of any dog found defecating...”

The phrase above introduces ambiguity because it can be construed to mean a human (not the dog) was "found defecating." In this sentence, the term "defecating" in the sentence is a reduced relative clause without an explicit subject. Since the phrase "found defecating" is not preceded by a pronoun such as "that is" or "which is," it is not clear if it is talking about "any person" or "any dog." The absence of any prohibition signal uncertainty and permits multiple interpretations of the ordinance. Explicit Subject Inclusion can help clarify this ambiguity.

To add, in **Null T-Head in Tense Phrase (TP)**, the Tense Phrase (TP) is an unpronounced (null) Tense (T) head found in syntactic structures, usually associated with the non-finite clause. The T-head is the syntactic position that corresponds to tense and subject agreement. When the T head is null, it is not a tensed head in an overt sense, and does not assign the subject nominative case. The following excerpt contains a null-T in Tense Phrase (TP):

“Children not identified until later may ultimately...”

The phrase above is ambiguous because it doesn't include an explicit auxiliary verb. Such omission leaves the statement ambiguous because it is unclear whether the phrase refers to a present, ongoing, or future event. The Tense Phrase (TP) is responsible for expressing tense in a sentence. These sorts

of omissions, while grammatically permissible, can cause syntactic ambiguity especially in formal writing where unambiguous communication is paramount.

Infinitival T-to-C Raising is a phenomenon which happens when the infinitival marker “to” raises from its usual place in the Tense Phrase (TP) to the Complementizer Phrase (CP). This means that the verb is in its base form since there is no tense explicitly stated in the clause. One example of a Null T in bare infinitive clause is found below:

“To assist in identifying successful management schemes
of literacy programs and adopt measures and boost
research and development work to literacy work.”

In the statement above, the phrase, “to assist” is the main infinitival phrase, and the other verbs “adopt” and “boost” do not explicitly have “to” before them. This inference indicates that the “to” from “to assist” may be structurally attached to all verbs in the sentence, even though it is overtly attached to the initial verb only. But the absence of “to” before “adopt” and “boost” is ambiguous about whether those two verbs are controlled by “to assist” or whether they stand alone. Infinitival Marker Insertion would further explicate this ambiguity. By ensuring that each infinitival verb is properly marked, the ambiguity in meaning can be significantly reduced.

Complementizer Deletion occurs when a complementizer such as “that” is omitted even when its presence is implicitly understood within the syntactic structure. Null C (Complementizer) in finite clauses occurs when the complementizer such as “that” is not overt in the clause. One instance of Null C in Finite Clauses is evident in:

“In addition to the foregoing penalties, the business permit
of the erring wholesale, retail, grocery or convenience store
or business establishment shall be cancelled by the City
Mayor upon its commission of the Third Offense.”

While a complementizer like “that” is usually used to introduce embedded clauses, making connections clear, it is missing in the statement. Without that marker, it remains unclear if the phrase regarding permit cancellation stands alone or depends on what came before. The missing marker brings confusion about whether pulling the permit is self-executing or needs an extra step of administration. In the given provision of the ordinance, the phrase “the business permit... shall be cancelled...” operates as a complete clause in its

own right, yet it lacks an overt complementizer linking it back to the introductory phrase. Such deletion makes the sentence become less interpretable because readers rely on context to establish the relationship of the clauses.

Non-Finite CP Deletion occurs when the Complementizer Phrase (CP) is null or not present, resulting in an unclear relationship between clauses. Within non-finite contexts, verbs fail to independently exhibit tense and regularly depend on an implicit subject or the surrounding circumstance for elucidation. Lacking an overt complementizer similar to "that," the structure becomes ambiguous. The following is an excerpt with Non-Finite CP Deletion:

"... to discharge or explode, or cause to discharge or to explode, any firecracker, or any other explosive or to use any pyrotechnic device or any such other similar device..."

Non-Finite CP Deletion best accounts for the ambiguity in the statement above because there are non-finite verbs that cannot occur in isolation with an independent subject or tense. The missing Complementizer Phrase (CP) contributes to the confusion about whether all the listed actions are prohibited equally or under different conditions.

A **reduced clause** is a short part of the sentence which has a missing verb or complementizer, but still conveys a thought. This results in a defective clause which means it does not have subjects, tense or a connecting word before the subsequent part of the sentence. Such instance is evident in the following:

"Any violation of this Ordinance shall be penalized by a fine of One Hundred (P100.00) Pesos for the first offense; Two Hundred (P200.00) Pesos for the second offense; and Three Hundred (P300.00) Pesos for the third offense or a subsidiary imprisonment not exceeding six (6) months in case of insolvency, or both such fine and imprisonment at the discretion of the court."

Here, the phrase "or both such fine and imprisonment at the discretion of the court" is a small and it lacks a complete verb or subject. The modifier "at the discretion of the court" is a prepositional phrase, but it does not tell us how the discretion is exercised. By having an incomplete sentence, it creates ambiguity about whether the court is in the position to decide the penalty or not.

Determiners clarify whether the noun is definite or indefinite. **Null determiners** are unpronounced phonetic elements such as "a" or "the". A Null DP is when a

noun phrase has no overt determiner, even in the context where one may have been implied. Notice the following excerpt:

“Entertainment and Other Business Establishment are prohibited from allowing any person in possession of any firearm, ammunition or explosive from entering its business or store premises during business or store hours.”

Because this provision has no determiner, it may be open to multiple interpretations. Here, the null determiner precedes the expression, “Entertainment and Other Business Establishment” and it is unclear whether it means all business places or only part of them without any definite as well as indefinite article like “an” or “the”. The best way to explicate this ambiguity is by the insertion of articles or demonstratives.

A **number misalignment** is a syntactic phenomenon which occurs when the subject and the verb of the sentence misalign in their number. The rule is a singular number of a subject must take a singular in number of a verb. The mismatch of the two elements results in a so-called misalignment. Such misalignment is evident below:

“Any person not covered by the exemption who are outside their residences during the curfew hours are in violation of this Ordinance and shall be reprimanded and sanctioned accordingly.”

DISCUSSION

This section discusses the implications for educational practice, recommendations for future research, and conclusions which were derived from the analyses of the language ambiguities of the Davao City ordinances.

Lexical Ambiguities

The analysis of the 30 Davao City ordinances identified three major types of lexical ambiguity: hyponymy, polysemy, and lower-use frequency idioms.

Hyponymy occurs when broad terms are used without specifying the people or objects they include. For example, the phrase *family members only* creates uncertainty about whether extended family members are covered. This supports Pimentel et al. (2020), who explained that readers rely on context when

general terms lack specific meanings, making legal interpretation more difficult.

The study also found that polysemy, or words with multiple related meanings, contributes to ambiguity. This aligns with Haber and Poesio (2024), who argued that polysemous words can confuse readers when the context does not clearly indicate the intended meaning.

Finally, lower-use frequency idioms were identified as another source of ambiguity because they are unfamiliar to many readers. Consistent with Carroll and Segaert (2024), the findings suggest that uncommon idiomatic expressions require greater cognitive effort and increase reliance on contextual clues, making legal provisions more difficult to understand.

Syntactic Ambiguities

Syntactic ambiguities were also identified in the 30 Davao City ordinances. The analysis revealed several types, including null subjects, Null T in auxiliariless finite clauses, Null T in bare infinitive clauses, Null C in finite and non-finite clauses, defective clauses, null determiners, subject–verb disagreement, subject–pronoun disagreement, null plural markers, and spelling and punctuation errors.

The findings show that null subjects create ambiguity because English generally requires an explicit subject, making it unclear who performs the action. This supports Radford (2004), who argues that English is a non-pro-drop language. Similarly, Null T in auxiliariless finite clauses obscures tense marking, making sentences difficult to interpret, particularly in complex constructions, consistent with Saleem et al. (2022). Null T in bare infinitive clauses also creates uncertainty because readers must rely on context rather than grammatical tense to determine meaning, supporting Grano (2022).

The study further found that omitting complementizers causes ambiguity. Null C in finite clauses increases reliance on context for interpretation, consistent with Kruger (2023), while Null C in non-finite clauses makes it difficult to distinguish subordinate from main clauses, supporting Shim and Ihsane (2023).

Other sources of ambiguity include defective clauses, which lack complete syntactic structure and produce vague legal provisions (Bousquet et al., 2020), and null determiners, which obscure whether nouns refer to specific or

general entities (Schneider et al., 2020). The analysis also identified subject–verb disagreement, which reduces grammatical clarity and legal precision. This finding is consistent with Prayuda (2021) and Pangga et al. (2020), who noted that agreement errors contribute to ambiguity and misunderstanding in formal texts.

Specific Constructs that Explicate the Ambiguities

This study identified several lexical constructs that explain the language ambiguities found in Davao City ordinances. The analysis revealed that ambiguity often results from unclear lexical relationships, broad meanings, semantic associations, and technical legal expressions.

The findings show that hierarchical lexical relations create ambiguity when terms are not explicitly defined. For example, the phrase *family members* is vague because the ordinance does not specify who is included, leading to varying interpretations such as parents and children only or extended relatives. This supports Abeyesiriwardana and Sumanathilaka (2024), who argued that unclear hierarchical lexical relations contribute to ambiguity and inconsistent interpretation.

The analysis also identified sense extension, where words acquire broader meanings beyond their original definitions. The term *drug-free*, for instance, may refer to the absence of drug use, freedom from drug influence, or compliance with drug testing policies, yet the ordinance does not clarify its intended meaning. Consistent with Abeyesiriwardana and Sumanathilaka (2024), the findings indicate that words with expanded meanings create confusion unless they are clearly defined in legal texts.

Another source of ambiguity is the semantic network of words, where multiple related meanings are activated in readers' minds. The term *motorized vehicle*, for example, can evoke different interpretations depending on an individual's background knowledge. This supports Song (2024), who explained that words connected to multiple semantic associations may generate ambiguity when contextual definitions are lacking. The findings highlight the importance of precise definitions to ensure consistent interpretation of legal provisions.

Finally, the study found that phraseologisms, or fixed legal expressions, contribute to lexical ambiguity. Technical terms such as *prima facie evidence* are difficult for lay readers to understand because they carry specialized legal

meanings. This finding aligns with Kalybayeva et al. (2020), who noted that phraseological units contain multiple layers of meaning and are often difficult to comprehend without sufficient context. The results suggest that simplifying or clearly explaining legal expressions can improve public understanding and reduce ambiguity in ordinances.

Syntactic Constructs

The findings revealed that several syntactic constructs contributed to ambiguity in the ordinances, affecting clarity and interpretation. The most common was the Pro-Drop Parameter, where omitted subjects made it unclear who was responsible for an action, supporting Khalfan (2020). Similarly, the omission of tense markers or auxiliaries created uncertainty about the timing of events, consistent with Butler (2023). The absence of the infinitive marker ("to") also obscured the relationship between verbs, producing structural ambiguity (Heil & Lopez, 2020).

The study further found that complementizer deletion (e.g., omitting *that*) and Non-Finite CP Deletion weakened the relationship between clauses, allowing multiple interpretations (Bonke & Repp, 2022; Kim, 2021; Nath, 2025). Likewise, reduced clauses, Null Determiner Phrases (Null DP), number misalignment, and implicit morphemes created uncertainty by omitting essential grammatical elements, making legal provisions more difficult to interpret (Wongkittiporn, 2023; Tollan & Palaz, 2024; Özay, 2020; Gerner & Ling, 2020). Collectively, these findings demonstrate that omissions and inconsistencies in syntactic structure reduce the precision required in legal documents and increase the possibility of multiple interpretations.

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