

### 8.2.3. Controlling ambiguity

Although ambiguity is hard to avoid entirely in English when claims of exemplification are combined with generalization, there are some indicators that tend to make a given interpretation more likely. There are, of course, many contextual indicators of the correct interpretation, and these can be quite strong, but explicit verbal indication is rarely conclusive.

Probably the most important verbal indication of relative scope is the simplest, word order. All things being equal, the first quantifier phrase is understood to be the main one. This means that the passive voice plays an important role in indicating the sort of claim we wish to make since it enables us to alter word order and promote a given quantifier phrase to subject position. Subject-predicate expansion can help in the same way when it is stylistically acceptable. But the effect is subject-predicate expansion is due also to another syntactic indicator: quantifier phrases within relative clauses are usually understood as having narrower scope than those outside them. In the case of existentials, use of the *there-is* form, which typically also involves a relative clause, will accomplish the same thing as an expanded form, and usually with better style. For example, *There is* [or *was*] *a reporter who interviewed each juror* definitely claims uniformity.

In addition to such syntactic indicators, word choice can play a role. The words *each*, *every*, and *all* (and *any* when it is grammatically possible) used to express generalizations and the words *some* and *a* used to express existential claims lend varying degrees of force to a quantifier phrase's claim to a wide scope. Perhaps these words never overcome the effects of word order, but they can moderate it, as may be seen with the following four restatements of our original sentence:

*Some reporter interviewed every juror*

*A reporter interviewed each juror*

*Every juror was interviewed by some reporter*

*Each juror was interviewed by a reporter*

The guiding idea here is that the word *some* marks a stronger claim to wide scope than the word *a* does and that the word *each* marks a stronger claim than the word *every*. The sentence at the upper left is the most likely to be understood as a claim of uniformly general exemplification and the one at the lower right is the least likely; the other two cases are intermediate, with word order probably beating out word choice so that the sentence at the upper right is the second most

likely to be understood to involve a claim of uniformity.

But, while the choices of wording mentioned so far are perhaps never enough to overcome the effects of word order, there are other words choices that are. There is a use of the word *certain* that seems to function only to mark an existential quantifier phrase as having wide scope. If we add this word to the existential quantifier phrase in the sentence at the lower right, we get *Each juror was interviewed by a certain reporter* and this sentence stands a very good chance of being interpreted as a claim of uniform exemplification in spite of word order and other choices of wording. On the other hand, if we add *or other* to the existential in the top left sentence, we get *Some reporter or other interviewed every juror*, which is less likely to carry an implication of uniformity. Context also plays a role in the effect of *or other*. For example, if we were discussing the events surrounding a *sort* of sensational trial that was typical of some historical era (rather than discussing a particular example of such a trial), there would be an implicit generalization concerning such trials in what we said. The use of *or other* might then simply cancel a claim of uniformity with respect to trials while allowing it to be maintained with respect to jurors.