

4.3. Ambiguous Pronouns: Pronouns with more than one eligible antecedent

Rule: A Pronoun should preferably have only *one* eligible antecedent: If a pronoun has *more than one* eligible antecedents, the pronoun is *ambiguous*. There should *not* be any *antecedent ambiguity*. In other words, no pronoun should have more than one *eligible antecedent* (refer to Table 1 for discussion on *eligible antecedent*).

Note: As we have noted above, a pronoun should *preferably* have only one eligible antecedent; there *are* instances when the correct answer in GMAT *does* have Pronoun ambiguity. Hence, Pronoun ambiguity should *not* be applied as the first criterion to eliminate an option. Only if more than one options are correct in all other respects, should pronoun ambiguity be applied as a criterion for selecting the right answer choice.

Let us look at few examples:

Though the team won the match, it was accused of foul play.

- The pronoun *it* has *two* eligible antecedents: *team* and *match* (both singular non-persons). Hence, the usage of pronoun *it* is *ambiguous* in this sentence.

Michael trained hard with Peter, so that he could get selected to the team.

- The pronoun *he* has *two* eligible antecedents: *Michael* and *Peter*. Hence, the usage of pronoun *he* is *ambiguous* in this sentence.

In such cases, where a pronoun has *multiple eligible* antecedents, apply the following 3-step procedure to determine whether the usage of pronoun is correct (despite the ambiguity):

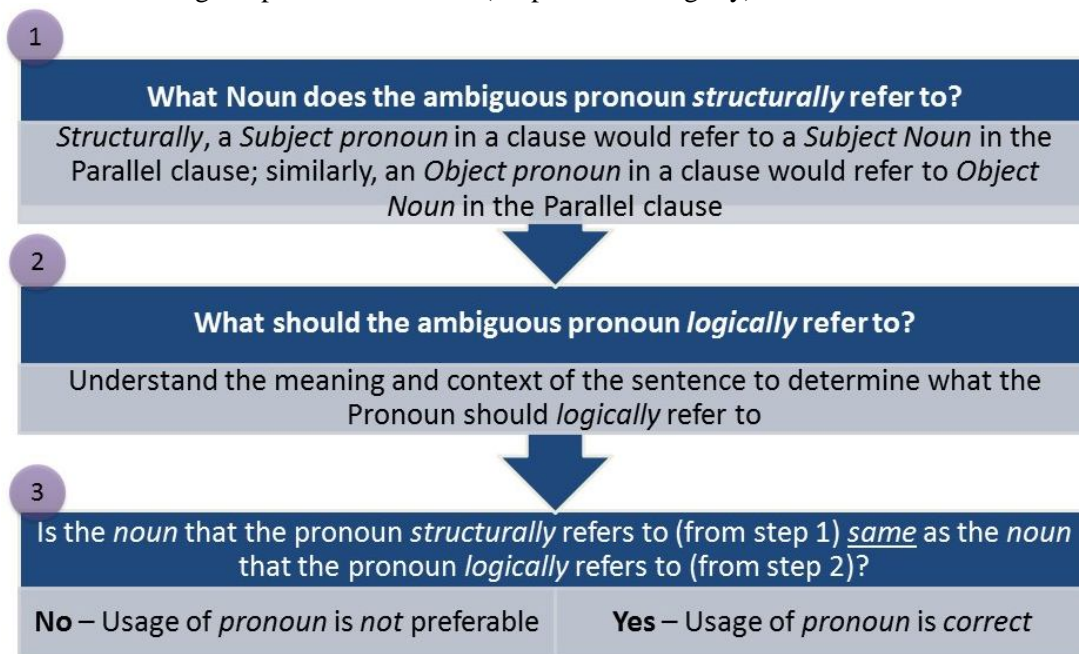


Figure 19: Framework for "ambiguous" pronoun

Let us look at the above sentence again:

Though the team won the match, it was accused of foul play.

The two clauses in this sentence are:

- i. *Though **the team** won the match*
 - *The team* is the *subject noun* of this clause
- ii. ***it** was accused of foul play.*
 - *it* is the *subject pronoun* of this clause

In the original sentence, the pronoun *it* has *two* eligible antecedents: *team* and *match*. Since the pronoun *it* is *ambiguous*, let us apply the above 3-step procedure (Figure 19) to determine whether the usage of pronoun *it* is correct (despite the ambiguity):

- 1) Step-1: *Structurally*, the pronoun *it* (*subject pronoun* of the clause) refers to the noun *team* (*subject noun* of the previous clause).
- 2) Step-2: *Logically*, the pronoun *it* should refer to the noun *the team*; because *logically*, “the team” (and not *the match*) was accused of foul play.
- 3) Step-3: The *noun* that the *pronoun* structurally refers to (*the team*) is same as the *noun* that the pronoun should *logically* refer to (*the team*).

Hence the usage of pronoun *it* in the above sentence is correct, and this is a valid sentence (despite the pronoun ambiguity).

Now let us look at another sentence in which pronoun ambiguity exists:

The bank paid interest on the deposits, but it was very low.

- The pronoun *it* has *two* eligible antecedents: *The bank* and *interest* (note that *deposits*, a *plural* noun is not an *eligible* antecedent of the *singular* pronoun *it*). Since the pronoun is *ambiguous*, we would apply 3-step procedure (Figure 19) to determine whether the usage of pronoun *it* is correct (despite the ambiguity).

The two clauses in this sentence are:

- i. ***The bank** paid interest on the deposits*
 - *The bank* is the *subject noun* of this clause
- ii. ***it** was very low*
 - *It* is the *subject pronoun* of this clause

Applying the 3-step procedure (as described in Figure 19):

- 1) Step-1: *Structurally*, the pronoun *it* (*subject pronoun* of the clause) refers to the noun *the bank* (*subject noun* of the previous clause).
- 2) Step-2: *Logically*, the pronoun *it* should refer to the noun *interest*; because *logically*, “interest” (and not *the bank*) was very low.

- 3) Step-3: The *noun* that the *pronoun* structurally refers to (*the bank*) is not the same as the *noun* that the pronoun should *logically* refer to (*interest*).

Hence the usage of pronoun *it* in the above sentence is *not* correct, and this is *not* a *preferable* sentence on GMAT. One way to fix this sentence would be to do away with the pronoun *it*:

The bank paid interest on the deposits, but the interest was very low.

Note: It should be noted that the above framework (Figure 19) should be applied only when the pronoun is ambiguous. For example:

*James kicked the **ball** and it travelled 15 yards.*

– The pronoun *it* has only *one* eligible antecedent: *ball*. Note that *deposits*, a *plural* noun is not an *eligible antecedent* of the *singular* pronoun *it*. Hence, the usage of *it* is valid and so, we should *not* apply the above framework (Figure 19) to this sentence.

Similarly, let's take another sentence:

*The child loved her **parents** and they showered her with gifts.*

– The pronoun *they* has only *one* eligible antecedent: *parents*. Note that *child*, a *singular* noun is not an *eligible antecedent* of the *plural* pronoun *they*. Hence, the usage of *they* is valid and so, we should *not* apply the above framework (Figure 19) to this sentence.