



We can hope only to escape reproach



Paul Warren
WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

MY THANKS to Mike Dwyer, of Kingston, who wrote: "It's disappointing to read language expert Paul Warren writing: 'Their chook only laid two eggs'. Shouldn't it read, 'laid only'?"

Mike's point is that the position of "only" makes a difference to the meaning. Since I meant "only" to refer to the number of eggs (it was only two eggs that they laid, not three), rather than the verb (they only laid the eggs, they didn't hatch them), then it would have been clearer if "only" had immediately preceded the word "two". In the context of my earlier article this was not important, but Mike's comment raises an interesting question about how much of a sentence the word "only" modifies.

The grammatical analysis of words like "only" or "even" or "always" is that they can modify all or part of a phrase that they precede. So in "their chook only laid two eggs", the scope of "only", ie, what it modifies, could be the whole action (all they did was lay two eggs), or just the verb (all they did to the eggs was lay them), or just the object (all they laid was two eggs).

Since the object (two eggs) is itself a phrase with two elements, the scope could also narrowly be the number (they laid only two) or the noun (the only thing they laid

two of was eggs). This last ambiguity ("only two" or "only eggs") is also present in Mike's alternative. Mike's suggestion is "better" than my original not because it is the only way of saying what I wanted to say, but because it does not have the same number of different meanings and is therefore less likely to result in misinterpretation.

So with all that ambiguity in "their chook only laid two eggs", how do we know what people mean? Some of it is down to common sense. In spoken language, the way we say such sentences can make a big difference. In particular, it is important where we place the stress. Let's use capitals to show that a word has been stressed. Try saying these aloud and compare the meanings you get: "Their chook only LAID two eggs", "their chook only laid TWO eggs" and "their chook only laid two EGGS". So with one position for "only", we can express different meanings.

Researchers have claimed that when we read text to ourselves we also "hear in our heads" the stress patterns and rhythms. This "implicit prosody", as it has been called, may be more noticeable to us under conditions like slow reading, and it can influence how we understand the sentences that we read, even in silent reading.

I predict that the implicit

prosody of "their chook only laid two eggs" is likely to result in the "only two" reading. This is partly because English sentences tend to have the main stress on the final phrase, unless there is some reason to emphasise another part of the sentence. In the sentence in question, the final phrase is the object "two eggs", and so it is likely that the "only" is taken to refer to that phrase.

Nevertheless, I could have made my meaning more explicit by putting the "only" a word later.

I suspect that another important factor is the tendency in English not to put adverbials between the verb and the object.

"Their chooks greedily ate the corn" is more likely than "their chooks ate greedily the corn".

The word "only" similarly gravitates to a position before the verb, even when it more narrowly modifies the object.

Of course, "language experts" are a prime target for commentators on language use. As the lexicographer Samuel Johnson wrote: "Every other author may aspire to praise; the lexicographer can only hope to escape reproach", or should that be "hope only"?

Paul Warren is at the school of linguistics and applied language studies at Victoria University.