Exemplars of structural ambiguity

“The old men and the old women” (the men are old, the women are old)
“The men and old women” (the women are old, the men are probably not old)
“The old men and women” (the men are old and the women are also old)
(The men are old, and there are some women who aren’t old)

“My cats and my dogs” (I own the cats, I own the dogs)
“Cats and my dogs” (I own the dogs, someone else owns the cats)
“My cats and dogs” (I own the cats, I own the dogs)
(I own the cats, and there are some dogs who might even be unowned)

“Picture of a cat in a box” (what is in the box?)
“Knife with a handle of wood from Thailand” (what is from Thailand?)

The effect of a comma on what the “provided” clause refers to

The policy covers use of a non-owned car by the insured and anyone else responsible for use by the insured of a non-owned car provided such use is with permission of the owner.

The policy covers use of a non-owned car by the insured, and anyone else responsible for use by the insured of a non-owned car provided such use is with permission of the owner.

The policy covers use of a non-owned car by the insured and anyone else responsible for use by the insured of a non-owned car provided such use is with permission of the owner.

The policy covers use of a non-owned car by the insured and anyone else responsible for use by the insured of a non-owned car, provided such use is with permission of the owner.

The effect of different determiners and pragmatic factors on determining the scope of the “with” clause.

John saw a woman and a man with a young child.
John saw a woman and the man with a young child.
John saw the woman and a woman with a young child.
John saw a woman and a dog with long hair.
John saw a woman and a dog with a pointy snout.

I’ll take a coke and a burrito with sour cream.
#I’ll take a coke and a burrito with ice.

When the last antecedent rule cannot apply.

“Seller will convey the property to buyer after repairing the roof”

Note that the “after” clause cannot take its subject from the last antecedent: it has to be the subject.
“Seller will convey the property to buyer after paying the sum of $200,000”
“I will throw away the stone after breaking the window”
*“I will smash the coconut after hitting me in the head”
“I will smash the coconut after hitting myself in the head”

The Across-the-Board rule: Trustees v. Judge in a nutshell.

“Any person who commits a felony or crime shall be fired”

Is this sensible? Could they have intended to say:

“All felonies are crimes. Compare a case where you don’t have this relation:
(mark these as to whether you think, under each statement, purchasing a hairless rat is a crime)

“...the purchase of a rodent or of any primate with no hair is a crime”
“...the purchase of a rodent or of a primate with no hair is a crime”
“...the purchase of a rodent or any primate with no hair is a crime”
“...the purchase of a rodent or a primate with no hair is a crime”
“...the purchase of a rodent or primate with no hair is a crime”
“...the purchase of any rodent or of any primate with no hair is a crime”
“...the purchase of any rodent or of a primate with no hair is a crime”
“...the purchase of any rodent or any primate with no hair is a crime”
“...the purchase of any rodent or primate with no hair is a crime”
Now consider how punctuation and distinctive positioning of “of” and / or a determiner influences how you understand the scope of “moral terpitude”. Some of these are distinctly strange.

“...convicted of a felony or of any crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of a felony or any crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of a felony or a crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of a felony or crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of a felony, or of any crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of a felony, or any crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of a felony, or a crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of a felony, or crime of moral terpitude”

“...convicted of any felony or of any crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of any felony or any crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of any felony or a crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of any felony or crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of any felony, or of any crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of any felony, or any crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of any felony, or a crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of any felony, or crime of moral terpitude”

“...convicted of any felony or of any crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of any felony or any crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of any felony or a crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of any felony or crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of any felony, or of any crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of any felony, or any crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of any felony, or a crime of moral terpitude”
“...convicted of any felony, or crime of moral terpitude”
And/Or: And means or, and vice versa.

“We can afford the Toyota or the Dodge, but not the Cadillac”
“Would you like the soup or the salad?”

“He bought a car and a truck”

entails both “He bought a car”
as well as “He bought a truck”

(unless he has one of those new-fangled transformer-hicles)

“He bought a car or a truck”

does not entail “He bought a car”
nor does it entail “He bought a truck”

De Morgan’s Law:

\[ \neg(A \land B) = \neg A \lor \neg B \]
\[ \neg(A \lor B) = \neg A \land \neg B \]

“Generally, the words “or” and “and” in a statute may be construed as interchangeable when necessary to effectuate legislative intent”

cf. Cal. Food & Ag Codes 64012

“Or” and “and,” may be construed as interchangeable, as the context may require.


Meaning of just or convenient. The words ‘just or convenient’ in the statutory provision (k) must be read ‘just, as well as convenient’
Beslity v. Manhattan Honda. The law:

“Any person who has been injured by reason of any violation of section 350 or 350-a of this article may bring an action in his own name to enjoin such unlawful act or practice and to recover his actual damages or fifty dollars, whichever is greater.”

may bring an action to enjoin and to recover
may take depositions and request documents =
    may take depositions and may request documents

A general rule: if may (A & B), then (may A) & (may B)

If may (A & B) then (may A) & (may B). But here we have only may(B): B= “bring action” (the action has a conjunction — “enjoin and recover”, which “may” can’t get at).