

Unconscious knowledge of language

Imagine you hear Matt say either (1a) or (1b).

- (1) a. Deval Patrick is a politician I want to succeed.
b. Deval Patrick is a politician I wanna succeed.

In case he said (1a), he could have expressed one of two desires

Matt's ideal world: *scenario 1* Deval Patrick succeeds.
 scenario 2 Matt succeeds Deval Patrick.

The sentence is ambiguous. The hearer has to guess which meaning is intended, for instance from the context, or other clues. In case Matt said (1b) however, things are clear. According to our intuitions, (1b) can only be used to express the second scenario

Matt's ideal world *scenario 2* Matt succeeds Deval Patrick.

Here are two more examples:

- (2) a. Louis Quatorze is a racehorse I want to win.
b. Louis Quatorze is a racehorse I want to win.

Matt's ideal world: *scenario 1* Louis Quatorze wins. (for instance the race)
 scenario 2 Matt wins Louis Quatorze (for instance as a prize)

- (3) a. Braeburn is a variety of apples I want to grow here.
b. Braeburn is a variety of apples I wanna grow here.

Matt's ideal world: *scenario 1* Braeburn apples grow here. (doesn't matter why)
 scenario 2 Matt grows Braeburn apples here.

When we look at the sentences closely, we see that they all follow a common scheme:

“Name” is someone/something that I want to / wanna “Verb”.

We can now describe the ambiguity in the “want to” sentences: It arises because the person or thing called “Name” can either be the *subject* or the *object* of “Verb”. It seems that the “wanna” sentences on the other hand can only be understood with it as the object.

We now have taken a first step towards discovering something about English. We found a pattern in the data, and saw that all of the cases above are instances of this pattern. Now we could go on and speculate about why this pattern might exist, and how it shows us something about the properties of English, and possibly even other languages.