Syntactic cues license voice mismatch in VP ellipsis – An experimental study

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Verb phrase ellipsis (in what follows, VPE) in principle allows for a voice mismatch between both conjuncts (1a), but this is not equally possible with all connectors (1b) (Kehler 2002).

(1) a. This problem was to have been looked into, but obviously nobody did ⟨look into this problem⟩ (Kehler 2002:53)
b.#This problem was looked into by John, and Bob did ⟨look into this problem⟩, too. (Kehler 2000:551)

We pursue the hypothesis that this is due to processing constraints. Processing relies on predictions about upcoming words and the less likely a word is, the more processing effort it requires (Levy 2008). Thus, if a parallel continuation is more likely after *and* than after *but*, parsing the mismatch in (1b) requires more effort, which causes degraded ratings. This predicts that (i) mismatches are better the weaker the parallelism bias of the connector is, and that (ii) other cues can further modulate this bias.

We investigated this with three acceptability rating studies on the effect of voice mismatches for the connectors *and*, *but* and *because*. Exp. 1 and 2 show that voice mismatches in items as (2) improve significantly with the subordinating *because* compared to *but*.

(2) Joshua didn't give Sarah private lessons in Mandarin (and | but | because) Jacob (did | was). (Active bias)

Exp. 3 shows that mismatches with *and* are further degraded if the parallelism bias is strengthened by the additional adverb *similarly* before *and*. This is predicted by our account, but does not directly follow from the categorial split predicted by Kehler's (2002) theory.

References: • Kehler, A. (2002). Coherence and the resolution of ellipsis. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 23, 533–575. • Levy, R. (2008). Expectation-based syntactic comprehension. *Cognition* 106, 1126–1177.