
Discourse status of possessed nouns affects interpretation of VP ellipsis

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The sentence, *Bill washed his car, and John did, too.*, has two possible interpretations if the overt *his* refers to Bill: (1) a coreferential (or “strict”) interpretation, in which John washed Bill’s car, or (2) a bound variable (or “sloppy”) interpretation, in which John washed his own car. What guides comprehenders’ selection of one over the other? Previous research has identified factors such as processing economy (e.g. Reuland, 2001), verbal semantics (Ong & Brasoveanu, 2014), and nominal semantics (Foley et al., 2003). Foley et al. found that inalienable possessions resulted in more sloppy interpretations than alienable possessions; however, this study was done with children and compared only inalienable vs. alienable possession relations. We hypothesize that the range of possession types found in language varies in the extent to which the possessum is processed as an independent discourse referent or as dependent on the discourse representation of its possessor. Moreover, we expect that such differences modulate the possessum’s availability for coreference and, therefore, affect strict/sloppy preference.

We conducted an experiment testing how four possession relations (inalienable, ownership, animate relational, and kinship) modulate adults’ strict/sloppy preference. Inalienable and ownership nouns favored sloppy interpretations more so than animate relational and kinship nouns. These results support the claim that the overt possession’s animacy and its resultant discourse status are important factors in the resolution of the elided possessive pronoun. We hypothesize that animate possessions are more likely to receive independent status in the discourse and consequently be available for coreference when the ellipsis is interpreted.

References: • Foley et al. (2003). Knowledge of Variable Binding in VP-Ellipsis. . . Syntax • Ong & Brasoveanu (2014). Strict and sloppy reflexives in VP ellipsis. Empirical Issues in Syntax and Semantics. • Reuland (2001). Primitives of binding. LI