"Context can!": Contextual accommodation in exophoric and anaphoric verb phrase ellipses

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Introduction

Traditional accounts posit that ellipsis sites are resolved under syntactic or semantic identity with an overt antecedent [1-6, inter alia]. The possibility of exophoric ellipsis [7] calls the exclusively linguistic nature of ellipsis interpretation into question.

If anaphoric ellipses are similarly sensitive to manipulations in the nonlinguistic context, previous accounts must be revised. Below, two experiments show that anaphoric ellipsis is sensitive to manipulations in the nonlinguistic context in a restricted way.

Experiment 1

Question
Does changing contextual availability of numeral affect likelihood of numeral being included in VPE interpretation?

Participants
152 native English speakers (66 male) aged 18-50 (mean=31.8, sd=7.7) included in analysis (41 excluded)

Reply Utterance
Father: We can’t.

VPE Interpretation Prompts
On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 is the least likely and 7 is the most likely, how likely do you think it is that the father meant...

Unmodified
We can’t buy any candy bars.

Modified
We can’t buy any candy bars. We can’t buy five candy bars, but maybe we could buy fewer.

Analysis
Overall mixed-effects model on z-transformed data shows significant three-way interaction between Comic Strip Context, Antecedent, and VPE Interpretation (p<.001)

By-Antecedent mixed-effects analysis:

Exophoric
- Sig. interaction b/w Comic Strip Context and VPE Interp. (p<.001)
- Paired comparisons: Ratings of Unmod. Interpretation decrease as a function of numeral salience in the context, while ratings of Mod. Interpretation increase (all p’s<.05)

Unmod. Ant.
- Sig. interaction b/w Comic Strip Context and VPE Interp. (p<.05)
- Paired comparisons: No effect of Comic Strip Context on ratings for Unmod. Interpretation (all p’s>.3)

Mod. Ant.
- Interpretation rated higher with Salient Context than with Unavailable (p<.01) or available (p<.001) Contexts

Discussion
No reliable role of Comic Strip Context in determining ratings

Exophoric ellipses interpretable under correct conditions.

Subjects perceived numeral salience gap in Comic Strip Contexts

Context can affect anaphoric ellipsis interpretation by promoting use of information not present in antecedent, but by suppressing information present in antecedent.

Unmodified Antecedents show antecedent-fulfilling, numeral-modified VPE Interpretation is more strongly considered when numerical information is salient in context

Modified Antecedents show that contextual manipulation has no effect when numeral is included in antecedent

Antecedent-fulfilling interpretation is always preferred

Experiment 2

Question
Is the effect from Exp. 1 unique to ellipsis, or is the Modified Interpretation also more available for a fully-realized response?

Participants
186 native English speakers (87 male) aged 18-50 (mean=31.9, sd=7.1) included in analysis (26 excluded)

Reply Utterance
Identical VP to Antecedent utterance

Unmodified
Father: We can’t buy candy bars.

Modified
Father: We can’t buy five candy bars.

Interpretation Prompts
Same as Experiment 1

Results

Modified Interpretation rated higher with Salient Context than with any other condition considered here (all p’s<.01)

Paired comparisons: Ratings of Unmod. Interpretation decrease for Unmod. Interpretation (all p’s>.01) for Exp. 1 & 2. Error bars denote standard error.

Discussion
Interpretations incorporating highly salient information from the non-linguistic context are more available for elliptical utterances than their spelled-out non-elliptical counterparts.

Conclusions

VPE interpretation is more nuanced than previously considered.

Salient non-linguistic information not included in an antecedent VP can be used in interpretation through accommodation mechanisms available with ellipsis, but not fully-realized utterances.

However, interpretations derived using these mechanisms are subordinate to those that are strictly faithful to the antecedent.

References