Ellipsis in context: The interaction of identity and discourse salience

Jeffrey Geiger & Ming Xiang

University of Chicago

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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 traditional identity condition into question. Experiment 1: Anaphoric ellipses are sensitive to manipulations in the nonlinguistic context, so identity-only accounts are inadequate. Experiment 2: Discourse status does not fully explain ellipsis interpretation, so discourse-only accounts are also inadequate.

Experiment 1 (cont.)

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 Interpretation (p<.001)

Paired comparisons: As a function of Context numeral salience, Unmod. ratings decrease, Mod. ratings increase (all p's<.05)

Unmod. Ant. Sig. interaction b/w Comic Strip Context and VPE Interpretation (p<.05)

Paired comparisons: No effect of Comic Strip Context on ratings for Unmod. Interpretation (all p's>.3)

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

Discussion

• Contextual salience affects exophoric ellipsis interpretation
  – Exophoric ellipsis interpretable under correct conditions
  – Subjects perceived numeral salience gap in Comic Strip Contexts

• Context asymmetrically affects anaphoric ellipsis interpretation
  – Unmodified Antecedents: Salient numeral information yields stronger consideration of Modified Interpretation
  – Modified Antecedents: No effect of numeral salience
  – Antecedent-faithful interpretation is always preferred

Experiment 2

Question

Can the effect from Exp. 1 be reduced to discourse status [7] or is an account with separate identity- and discourse-driven interpretation mechanisms [5, inter alia] more likely?

Participants

165 native English speakers (77 male) aged 18-50 (mean=32.4, sd=8.3) included in analysis (31 excluded)

Reply Utterance

Exp. 1 VPE Interpretation Prompts replace VPE Reply - fully specified VP in response

Rating Prompts

Subjects rate coherence of reply (1 to 7 scale) given prior context and antecedent - assumed to measure discourse salience of numeral/no numeral alternatives

Results

Significant 3-way interaction b/w Comic Strip Context, Antecedent, and Reply (p<.05)

Paired comparisons: With Unmodified Antecedent, Salient Context, no reliable coherence difference between Unmodified and Modified Replies (p>.4)

Modified Antecedent: No significant effect of Reply (p>.3)

Discussion

In Exp. 2, the two replies are equally discourse coherent in several conditions where one interpretation was significantly preferred in Exp. 1. The preference for antecedent-faithful interpretations in Exp. 1 cannot be reduced to discourse salience of alternative propositions

Discourse-only accounts like [7] are not adequate for VPE facts.

Conclusion

Exp. 1: Exphoric and anaphoric VPE interpretation can be influenced by nonlinguistic information. For anaphoric VPE, nonlinguistic information is subordinate. Pure identity is insufficient.

Exp. 2: The effect of nonlinguistic information in Exp. 1 cannot be reduced to discourse status. Discourse-only accounts are insufficient.

VPE interpretation consists of separate but interactive modules considering linguistic and nonlinguistic information.