Verb Phrase Ellipsis as Discourse Reference

Till Poppels & Andrew Kehler
UC San Diego

Introduction

2 broad questions

- Acceptability: under what conditions is VPE grammatical?
- Meaning: how does it obtain its meaning?

Identity analysis

- I can’t <PRO>.
- Acceptable if ellipsis is identical to antecedent
- Meaning derived from ellided VP

Referential analysis

- I can’t <PRO>.
- Acceptable when referent available or "accommodatable"
- Meaning through reference

Can you see the remote control anywhere?

I can’t, sorry!

The role of world knowledge

1. Few antecedent verbs: VPE meaning deviates from antecedent
2. Higher entropy in verb choice
3. Acceptable ellipses (but see control experiment, testing non-elliptical variants)

Aggregated results

VPE patterns with nominal reference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-local antecedents</th>
<th>VPE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan collapsed into the arm chair. This had been a particularly long day at work. Not knowing what to do now that it was over, he turned on the TV.</td>
<td>The thought came back, the one nagging at him these past four days. It told him… But the words were forming. He knew he couldn’t &quot;PRO&quot; Hark!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If she calls you, being probably bored, you should not want it.</td>
<td>If you really want to &quot;PRO&quot;, we can go to the mall (Kehler, 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exophora Did you hear that?!</td>
<td>If you really want to &quot;PRO&quot;, we can go to the mall (Miller &amp; Pullum, 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Split antecedents</td>
<td>Bruce can walk and he can chew gum. Sarah can PRO too, but not at the same time. (adapted from Webbber, 1978)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Partee’s marbles

(6) a. I dropped 10 marbles and found all but one of them. It might be under the sofa.
   b. I dropped 10 marbles and found 9 of them. # It might be under the sofa.

The pants/scissors effect

(7) a. Have you seen my grey pants? I can’t find them.
   b. Can you pass me the scissors? – Here they are (fits its).

An outstanding puzzle & future research

(8) After the test I wasn’t sure if I had passed or not? As it turns out…
   a. ...I did <PRO>.
   b. ...I didn’t <PRO>.
   c. ...It’s less likely than I thought. [pass][fail]

Next steps:

- Replicate effect with larger item set
- Compare explicitly to bridging inferences in nominal domain
- Extend referential analysis to other "mismatches"

References


Acknowledgements

This work has greatly benefitted from insightful comments from Roger Levy, Jesse Capogrosso, Dale Barney, Vic Ferreira, members of UCSD Semantics Babble and Experimental Syntax Lab, as well as audiences at CLS 53 and ECBAE 2017. We gratefully acknowledge support from NSF grant BCS-1450851.