

The (un)grammatical and the (un)acceptable in the processing of VP Ellipsis: Looking into the Recycling Approach

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Introduction/Background: If the grammar does not allow sentences which should be allowed in the language, then the grammar is considered to undergenerate. In the present work we put under scrutiny a broadly accepted proposal amongst approaches of VP Ellipsis (VPE) processing. This approach is known to provide a possible solution to an alleged Undergeneration Problem: The Recycling Approach to Processing of Ellipsis (Arregui et al., 2006, Frazier, 2013 and related works). The proponents of this approach take the acceptability percentages associated with the sentences in (1), in English, as evidence to the hypothesis that repair/recycling rules act in the processing of ellipsis in cases in which there is not a perfect syntactic match between the ellipsis site and the antecedent. In order for this proposal to work, Arregui et al. assume an analysis where (1a) is grammatical, since this sentence presents an appropriated antecedent VP to the elided VP, whereas the sentences in (1b-d) are all considered strictly ungrammatical, because they do not present a parallel antecedent to the elision site. So, the authors explain the ungrammaticality of the sentences in (1b-d) by the following reasons: in (1b), an antecedent VP is present, but embedded inside the subject; in (1c) the actual antecedent could be repaired to the desired shape by replacing the trace after *see* with its ultimate binder; in (1d) the desired VP antecedent could only be constructed by searching inside a word to find a verb (*see*) that could be used as the head of a VP with the appropriate shape.

Problems for this approach: If the recycling approach is a general approach to VP ellipsis processing, it is expected that recycling operations work basically in the same way regardless of the language in question. Therefore, the recycling approach predicts that languages that allow VPE should reproduce the same effects observed in (1) in terms of acceptability. However, this is not what happens in Brazilian Portuguese (BP), a language that also allows VPE. Any BP speaker will judge as equally acceptable the sentences in (2), in which the conditions of the ellipsis antecedent are exactly the same as those observed in (1a-c). Moreover, a categorical scale of acceptability judgment does not seem to be the most appropriate when the goal is to capture the relative strength of syntactic violations (Bard et al., 1996; Sorace, 2010), as appears to be the case in the proposal under discussion. Another problematic point in Arregui et al.'s proposal is that these authors seem to operate with the idea that there will always be a predictable relationship between grammaticality and acceptability. This is still an open question for debate. Evidence to the contrary has been obtained in Aparício et al.'s (2014) study, in which the authors note, by means of an eye-tracking study, that the ellipsis resolution is clearly sensitive to morphological feature mismatch like those in (3), despite the fact that such cases are highly acceptable ($\geq 80\%$ acceptance). Lastly, it is important to note that the only online measure obtained in Arregui et al.'s experiment did not show robust evidence to support the recycling hypothesis.

Our proposal: We propose that the decreased acceptability in (1a-d) does not necessarily entail ungrammaticality of the sentences (at least in sentences like 1a-c). While we do not yet have an explanation for the acceptability cline observed in English data, in terms of processing effects or any other effects, we can provide a grammatical analysis to derive the syntactic identity between the elision site and the antecedent in cases such as those in (1a-c), in English, or those in (2a-c), in BP. Our analysis indicates that such cases are not representative of an undergeneration problem, which typifies a greater advantage for syntactic approaches of VPE. Thus, just as the sentences in (1a / 2a) are consensually grammatical, insofar as syntactic identity between elision site and antecedent is correctly computed, the sentences in (1b / 2b) can be strictly analyzed as grammatical if we do away

with the idea that the position of the antecedent of the VPE is relevant to its resolution (at least in the terms presented in Arregui et al.); thus, what seems to be relevant to the resolution of the VPE must be the internal structure of the antecedent VP, but not its position (pre/post-subject) in the previous sentence. The fact that the antecedent VP is embedded as subject of the previous sentence does not violate a requirement for syntactic identity and therefore does not make the sentence ungrammatical, as is clear from the grammatical data of BP (2b). Regarding (1c / 2c), where the antecedent represents a typical case of *tough* construction, identity is virtually computed if we consider that there is a copy of the DP *the comet/o cometa* in the complement position of *see/ver*. This is supported by the thesis that *tough* constructions are restructuring constructions, and that the movement of the DP from the internal argument position of the verb to the subject position of the matrix is motivated by the absence of the accusative structural Case in infinitive sentences (Oliveira, 2009).

- (1) *Acceptability judgment data measured in percent acceptable*
- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|-------|
| a. None of the astronomers saw the comet, /but John did. | (Available verb phrase) | 82 .8 |
| b. Seeing the comet was nearly impossible, /but John did. | (Embedded verb phrase) | 66 .1 |
| c. The comet was nearly impossible to see, /but John did. | (Verb phrase with trace) | 43 .9 |
| d. The comet was nearly unseeable, /but John did. | (Negative adjective) | 17 .1 |
- (Frazier, 2013:488)
- (2)
- | | | |
|---|----------------------------|--|
| a. Nenhum dos astronautas viu o cometa, mas João viu.
'None of the astronomers saw the comet, but John did.' | (available verb phrase) | |
| b. Ver o cometa era quase impossível, mas João viu.
'Seeing the comet was nearly impossible, but John did.' | (embedded verb phrase) | |
| c. O cometa era quase impossível de ver, mas João viu.
'The comet was nearly impossible to see, but John did.' | (verb phrase with "trace") | |
- (3)
- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| a. Juan es alto y María también.
Juan is tall. <i>masc.sg</i> and María. <i>fem.sg</i> too.
'Juan is tall and María is too.' | | |
| b. El alumno es alto y los profesores también.
The student. <i>masc.sg</i> is tall and the teachers. <i>masc.pl</i> too.
'The student is tall and the teachers too.' | | |
- (Aparicio et al., , 2014:5)

References

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