

The effect of gender (mis)match on the interpretation of English reflexive pronouns in cases of VP-ellipsis by native and non-native speakers of English

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As is well-known in the literature (e.g., Fiengo and May 1994), reflexive anaphora in VP-ellipsis can lead to two potential readings (as in 1):

- 1) Mary blamed herself and Heather did too.
 - (i) Heather blamed Heather (sloppy reading)
 - (ii) Heather blamed Mary (strict reading)

The sloppy and the strict interpretations have been traditionally accounted for by alluding to principles A and B of the Binding Theory, respectively (Chomsky 1981). Research has shown that the sloppy reading is preferred, but findings are inconclusive as to whether this choice is more prevalent in native or non-native speakers (see Ying 2005, Park 2016, and Gandón-Chapela & Gallardo-del-Puerto 2019 for Chinese, Korean, and Spanish learners of English). One variable that has been relatively unexplored is the effect of gender (mis)match on the readings of English reflexive pronouns (as either strict or sloppy) in cases of VP-ellipsis (see Storoshenko 2017 for L1 speakers of English), as instantiated in (2) and (3), which illustrate gender match and mismatch between the reflexive pronoun that acts as the antecedent and that of the ellipsis site, respectively:

- (2) Peter_i has voted for *himself*_i and Robert_j has ~~voted for himself~~_j ~~/him~~_i too.
(3) Peter_i has voted for *himself*_i and Elaine_j has ~~voted for herself~~_j ~~/him~~_i too.

This paper explores the effect of gender (mis)match on the interpretation of English reflexive pronouns in cases of VP-ellipsis by native speakers of English and by learners of English whose first language (Spanish) does not license VP-ellipsis constructions. Two research questions are entertained:

- Does gender mis(match) affect native speakers' and learners' interpretation of English reflexive anaphora in VP-ellipsis?
- Does English proficiency affect participants' interpretation of English reflexive anaphora in VP-ellipsis?

A group of 32 native speakers of English and three groups of Spanish learners of English (19 lower-intermediate, 22 upper-intermediate and 11 advanced) completed an online form which contained a two-alternative (sloppy-strict) forced-choice task including 20 distractors, 10 gender-matched (as in (2)) and 10 gender-mismatched (as in (3)) sentences with human subjects. For instance, in (2) the two options provided were: (i) Robert has voted for Peter, (ii) Robert has voted for Robert.

Pertaining inferential statistical analyses confirmed that, in agreement with Principle A of the Binding Theory, all groups preferred the sloppy interpretation rather than the strict one. Gender (mis)match was found to exert an influence on native speakers (contrary to Storoshenko's 2017 findings), as they interpreted gender-mismatched sentences sloppily to a significantly lesser extent than gender-matched sentences. This effect was not found in non-native speaker groups, whose preference for sloppy readings was less strong in both gender-matched and -mismatched sentences. A proficiency effect was attested in the case of gender-matched sentences, as native speakers' sloppy choice was statistically superior to that of intermediate level learners, but not to that of advanced learners.

Keywords

VP-ellipsis; reflexive pronouns; gender mismatch; proficiency level; L2 English

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