Locality and Sloppy Identity: Evidence from a Web Survey

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1 Locality and Sloppy Identity

According to the influential Sag/Williams account, a sloppy reading in VP ellipsis reflects the presence of a lambda operator with scope over the elided VP; the sloppy pronoun is bound by that operator. On this view, sloppy readings must be *local* – the sloppy pronoun must co-vary with the subject of the elided VP. This locality constraint makes a sloppy reading possible in (1) but not in (2), as argued by Sag (1976).

- (1) John said Mary hit him. Harry did too. (said Mary hit John/Harry)
- (2) John said Mary hit him. Harry said she did too. (*hit John/*Harry*)

Subsequent authors (Dalrymple *et al.* (1991); Rooth (1992); Fiengo and May (1994); Tomioka (1999)) have rejected this view; for these accounts, there is no locality constraint on sloppy readings. These authors point to examples such as (3) (Rooth (1992)), which is claimed to have a sloppy reading.

(3) First John told MARY I was bad-mouthing her. Then he told SUE I was. *(bad-mouthing Sue)*

Despite over three decades of controversy, the relevant judgments have never been subjected to systematic empirical testing. In this paper I discuss results from a recent web-based survey – results that suggest a new perspective on this long-standing debate.

2 The Survey

Participants were instructed to rate examples on the following four-point scale: 0: *Fully Acceptable, 1: Closer to Acceptable, 2: Closer to Unacceptable, 3: Fully Unacceptable.* Examples were presented together with the reading to be evaluated (parenthesized in italics). The following are the four categories of interest:

Example Type	Mean Judgment
Strict	.66
John said Mary hit him. Harry did too. (said Mary hit John)	
Local Sloppy	.61
John said Mary hit him. Harry did too. (said Mary hit Harry)	
Non-local Sloppy	1.16
John said Mary hit him. Harry said she did too. (hit Harry)	
Non-local Sloppy (Strict Blocked)	.39
Nearly every student felt I ought to tutor her.	
But Susan didn't feel I should (tutor Susan)	

The first category is *Strict*: here, the embedded pronoun in the antecedent receives the same reading at the ellipsis site. Second is *Local Sloppy*: these cases are permitted by Sag/Williams, because the embedded pronoun covaries with the local subject. In the *Non-local Sloppy* category the embedded pronoun covaries with something other than the local subject. In this category, the strict reading is also a potential reading. Finally, *Non-local Sloppy* (*Strict Blocked*) has ensured that the strict reading is unavailable (or degraded), because the pronoun is bound by a quantifier in the first sentence.

The mean judgments are given for each type of example, and are displayed graphically in Figure 1. The main result is that non-local sloppy readings are normally degraded, but become completely acceptable when the strict reading is blocked. This result is problematic for all previously proposed theories of which I am aware. For the Sag/Williams view, non-local sloppy readings should always be unacceptable; thus, their acceptability when strict is blocked is unaccounted for. For the non-local theories, the degraded quality of non-local sloppy readings is unexplained, as is the fact that they become acceptable when strict is blocked. The recent account of Takahashi and Fox (2005) also fails to predict the acceptability of the non-local sloppy when strict is blocked.



Figure 1: Survey Results

3 Proposed Account

I propose to account for these observations in the following way: the lambda binder appears at the VP ellipsis site, just as in the Sag/Williams account. Lambda can be moved to another position, but only if necessary to satisfy parallelism (or related coherence conditions). This captures the fact that Non-local Sloppy readings are acceptable just in case the strict reading is blocked. Consider (2), repeated below:

(4) John said Mary hit him. Harry said [she did, $\lambda x.x$ hit him] too

Here, lambda is not in the right position to get the sloppy reading; it must be moved so that it is adjacent to Harry, below.

(5) John said Mary hit him. Harry λ x.x said she did *hit* x] too

Now the sloppy reading would be possible. However, the movement of lambda is here not permitted, since Parallelism can be satisfied by the strict reading. With the final category, strict is blocked, as in

(6) Nearly every student felt I ought to tutor her. But Susan didn't feel I should $\lambda x. x$ (*tutor Susan*)

To capture the sloppy reading, we need to lambda abstract over Susan, moving lambda as follows:

(7) Susan, λ x. x didn't feel I should (*tutor x*)

Now the sloppy reading is captured. Here, movement of lambda is permitted, since the strict reading is blocked. Without moving lambda, Parallelism is violated.

This account can be shown to follow from the following general considerations: the "moving" of lambda is meaning-preserving, and thus can be viewed as an inference performed on LF representations. I propose that such inferences are in general permitted just in case they are triggered by violations at the semantic interface. Thus the proposed account of the strict/sloppy alternation follows directly from these general considerations.

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