

Acceptability of VP ellipsis: discourse conditions vs. syntactic identity

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VP Ellipsis (VPE) is standardly taken to be a surface-anaphor, requiring a syntactically identical antecedent at some level (H&S76, Mer13). In this paper we show that discourse conditions on VPE can have as strong an effect on the acceptability of VPE as syntactic mismatch. Specifically we propose the following QUD relevance constraint:

- (1) **QUD Relevance Constraint (QUDRC):** VPE is most acceptable when the elliptical clause addresses a QUD that is directly raised by the antecedent clause. When this is not the case, acceptability correlates with the ease with which the QUD addressed by the elliptical clause can be accommodated from the antecedent clause.

Experiment 1 shows the effect of QUDRC violations on syntactically identical antecedents: 79 subjects (MTurk) judged the acceptability (on a 1-7 scale) of 40 items (1a-d), based on two factors: (i) whether the antecedent is asserted or backgrounded (ASS vs. BG) and (ii) VPEllipsis vs. VPAnaphor (*do it*). Results are shown in Figure 1. They provide corroboration for QUDRC, as there is a significant difference (maximal CLMMs; $p < .01$) in acceptability for VPE depending on whether the antecedent clause is asserted or backgrounded (contrasting with no effect for VPA, interaction: $p < .01$). Crucially the syntactic identity condition has no way to account for this difference, as there is an equally close syntactically identical antecedent in both VPE conditions.

Experiment 2 provides a comparison of the effects on acceptability of syntactic mismatch in relation to QUDRC. Procedures for Exp 2 were identical to Exp 1, but with 25 items (like 2a-e) and 61 participants. Items are based on two factors (i) category match (CM) vs category mismatch (CMM), and (ii) whether QUDRC is satisfied or not (QUD±) plus a no-ellipsis condition.

Results from Exp 1 raise questions about the interpretation of previous acceptability experiments on syntactic mismatch in VPE since (as has been known since TC90, MTC95) syntactic mismatch typically leads to modifying discourse properties. E.g., nominal antecedents typically background the proposition they express, so that it is unclear what the respective influence of mismatch and QUDRC might be. In order to circumvent this confound we use 'Polar Nouns' like *participation* as antecedents in the mismatch conditions of Exp 2. These nouns are exceptional in that they can be the head of an NP which can be interpreted in a way similar to an indirect question, when placed in certain contexts taking indirect interrogatives, as shown by the paraphrase relation that obtains between the category match (CM) and category mismatch (CMM) conditions in 2a-d. All of the antecedents in the materials satisfy QUDRC, irrespective of mismatch. In order to vary satisfaction of QUDRC, we manipulate the presence of a non-contrastive adjunct in the elliptical clause: Including a non-contrastive adjunct after VPE violates QUDRC by making the clause go beyond simply addressing a QUD raised by the antecedent (see AUTHORS for independent evidence). We also include the nonelliptical condition (2e) to control for possible effects of adding the adjunct. Results are shown in Fig 2. Maximal CLMMs did not show a significant difference between the No Ellipsis and the CM/QUD+ conditions, confirming that any decrease in acceptability in the QUD- conditions was not due to the choice of the adjunct (all other conditions were significantly less acceptable, $ps < .001$). Individual violations of the match condition and of the QUDRC both led to a significant decrease in acceptability compared to the control condition (two main effects, $ps < .001$) and there was a significant interaction in that the violation of the QUD Relevance Constraint is bigger for matching antecedents ($p < .001$). In other words, **violating the QUDRC can decrease acceptability as much as category mismatch does.**

In **conclusion**, we show that discourse constraints can affect the acceptability of VPE as strongly as mismatch. Yet there persists a penalty for category mismatch, even when QUDRC is satisfied: Post-hoc comparisons showed that CMM/QUD+ is significantly less acceptable than CM/QUD+ ($p < .01$). We suggest that this is due to the fact that the QUD addressed by the elliptical clause is directly raised in CM but must be accommodated in CMM.

References

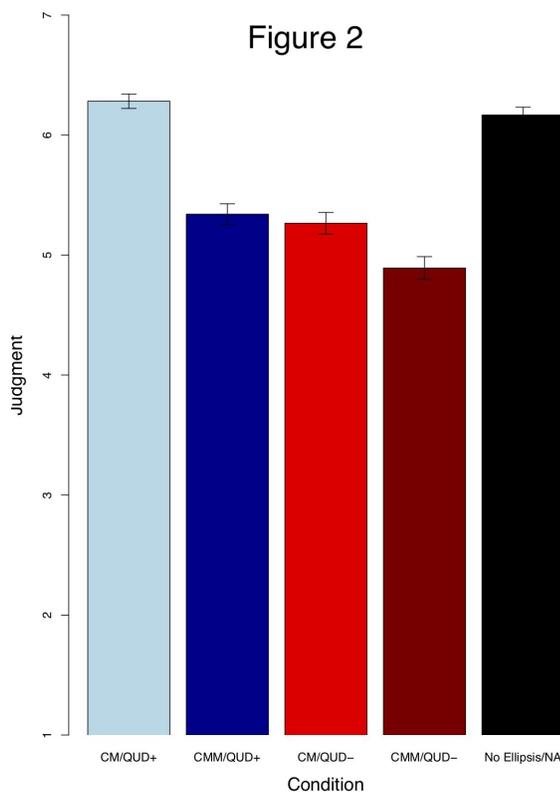
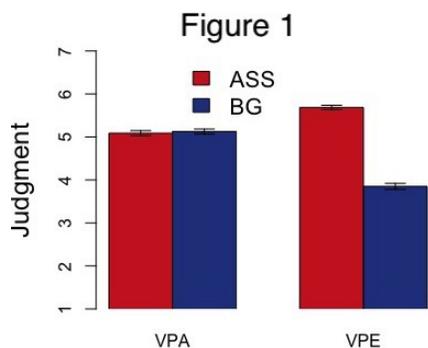
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(1) Materials for Experiment 1:

- VPA/ASS A—When he was in the kitchen he read the instructions. B—He did it in the kitchen?¹
- VPA/BG A—He was in the kitchen when he read the instructions. B—He did it in the kitchen?
- VPE/ASS A—When he was in the kitchen he read the instructions. B—He did?
- VPE/BG A—He was in the kitchen when he read the instructions. B—He did?

(2) Materials for Experiment 2:

- CM/QUD+ We are uncertain whether he will participate in the study. It will improve the results if he does.
- CMM/QUD+ We are uncertain of his participation in the study. It will improve the results if he does.
- CM/QUD– We are uncertain whether he will participate in the study. It will improve the results if he does actively.
- CMM/QUD– We are uncertain of his participation in the study. It will improve the results if he does actively.
- No Ellipsis We are uncertain whether he will participate in the study. It will improve the results if he participates actively.



¹ We include a noncontrastive adjunct in the VPA conditions because we know from previous experiments that the absence of such an adjunct in these contexts independently decreases the acceptability of VPA.