

Local identity avoidance and reflexivity

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An intriguing question in the evolution of language involves the interaction between language specific versus general properties of our cognitive system. Consider the following simple task: take a verb expressing a two-place relation, and use it to represent a reflexive instantiation of this relation. It has been observed in a great many languages that something special is required for the expression of reflexivity (e.g. Faltz 1977/1985; Schladt 2000; Reuland 2017, 2018 and references cited). Cross-linguistically what is necessary varies from marking the object (e.g. pronoun+intensifier e.g. König and Töpper 2013; a body-part noun, etc.), or using a special verb form (e.g. affix, special clitic, etc.).

A key factor underlying this pattern is “local identity avoidance”. To see this, consider a representation as in (1):

(1) DP Verb Pronoun

Using a standard representation of variable binding, if DP were to bind the pronoun straight away the logical form in (2) would result, with two occurrences of the same variable in a local domain, and θ_1 , θ_2 the semantic roles the verb must assign:

(2) DP $(\lambda x \text{ (Pred}_{[\theta_1, \theta_2]}(x, x))$

As will be shown, given the properties of the lexical space, the computational system cannot keep the two occurrences of x apart, reducing (2) to (3):

(3) DP $(\lambda x \text{ (Pred}_{[\theta_1, \theta_2]}(x))$

Compositionality is upheld, but it results in indeterminacy in semantic role assignment. Thus, the grammatical system must avoid a process leading to two identical variables in a local domain as in (2/3). Two strategies to overcome this problem are observed.

i) languages may use an operation of detransitivization (Reinhart and Siloni 2005), in which the semantic roles are bundled into a complex role:

(4) DP $(\lambda x \text{ (Pred}_{[\theta_1-\theta_2]}(x))$

In English we see no morphological reflex of this lexical operation; in other languages we do: various affixal forms in Slavic (Geniušienė 1987), or the presence of *diri* in Indonesian, etc.

ii) languages may differentiate the arguments, e.g. by making the object morpho-syntactically more complex, as in (5):

(5) DP $(\lambda x \text{ (Pred}_{[\theta_1, \theta_2]}(x, [\text{Morph } x]))$

So, *pronoun-self* and cognates in Germanic, bodypart expressions such as *tav tavis* in Georgian (Amiridze 2006), or doubled pronouns such as *taan tanne* in Malayalam (Jayaseelan 1997), all introduce an additional element, differentiating the object argument, thus licensing reflexivization. What underlies local identity avoidance may well reflects a more general property of the human cognitive system (Bavelier 1994; Walter 2007).

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