Not always so different:  
Non-structural effects on the interpretation of pronouns and reflexives

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The ability take someone else’s perspective is a crucial component of human interaction, relevant in linguistic and non-linguistic situations. We investigated how factors related to perspective-taking interact with semantic and syntactic factors during reference resolution.

According to Kuno (1987), reflexives in certain contexts, e.g. picture-NPs (PNPs, ex.1), are sensitive to Point-of-View (POV). Similarly, Tenny (2003) suggests PNP-pronouns also refer to the person whose perspective/POV is being represented. However, these claims of shared POV-sensitivity are at odds with work (Kaiser et al. 2009) showing that PNP-pronouns and reflexives are guided by opposing syntactic and semantic preferences (also Chomsky, 1981 cf. Reinhart & Reuland, 1993; Keller & Asudeh, 2001): Reflexives prefer subjects and sources-of-information; pronouns prefer objects and perceivers (ex.1). We investigated the extent to which PNP-pronouns and reflexives are governed by shared-vs.-opposing biases.

(1a) Peter\textsubscript{SOURCE} told John\textsubscript{PERCEIVER} about the picture of \{him/himself\} on the wall.
(1b) Peter\textsubscript{PERCEIVER} heard from John\textsubscript{SOURCE} about the picture of \{him/himself\} on the wall.

Exp1 tested (i) whether pronouns and reflexives are sensitive to POV, and (ii) whether there is evidence of pronouns and reflexives exhibiting both (a) opposing preferences (subject/object, source/perceiver) and (b) similar preferences (POV-antecedents). Design: We manipulated referential form (pronoun/reflexive), source/perceiver (told/was told) and form of the perceiver (name/someone) (8 conditions, ex.2). Participants (n=24) read sentences and answered questions, as shown in ex.(3). We used voice (active/passive) to manipulate source/perceiver (ex.(2a,b): subject=source, object=perceiver, ex.(2c,d) reverses). To manipulate POV, we used names vs. indefinite someone. This is because if someone’s identity is unspecified/indefinite, that entity is not a suitable POV-anchor (Kuno, 1987). Thus, if a particular form is used to refer to the person whose POV is being represented, that form should show a dispreference for ‘someone’.

(2a) Nick\textsubscript{SOURCE} told Jeff\textsubscript{PERCEIVER} …about the picture of\{him/himself\}  
(2b) Nick\textsubscript{SRC} told someone\textsubscript{PERC} …about the picture of\{him/himself\}  
(2c) Jeff\textsubscript{PERC} was told by Nick\textsubscript{SRC} …about the picture of\{him/himself\}  
(2d) Someone\textsubscript{PERC} was told by Nick\textsubscript{SRC} …about the picture of\{him/himself\}

Results. Overall, reflexives prefer subjects (81.5% subject-choices); pronouns are split between subjects and objects (53% subject-choices). We replicate Kaiser et al.’s (2009) findings with active/passive: (i) reflexives’ subject preference is modulated by a source preference (significantly more subject-choices when subject=source); (ii) pronouns show a perceiver preference (significantly more object-choices when object=perceiver). Crucially, these biases are modulated by a unidirectional POV-effect: both pronouns and reflexives
significantly prefer names over ‘someone.’ In this dimension, pronouns and reflexives pattern alike. (‘Someone’ is not categorically rejected; rather, it is chosen less often than names.)

(3) Sample items for Exp 1

Jeff was told by Nick about the picture of himself.  
Who was in the picture?  
(a) Jeff  
(b) Nick

Someone was told by Nick about the picture of himself.  
Who was in the picture?  
(a) The unnamed ‘someone’  
(b) Nick

To probe the generalizability of these findings, **Exp2** (n=32) used the same method to test whether other referentially-unspecified elements, *who* and *which of the* (ex.4a-d), pattern like *someone* (also included, ex.4e-f). **Results:** These three forms pattern alike; dispreferred by pronouns and reflexives. Furthermore, reflexives (but not pronouns) prefer *which* over *who*. Since ‘which’ asks about a certain set member, it could be regarded as more specific (better POV-anchor) than ‘who.’ This suggests reflexives may exhibit fine-grained POV-sensitivity.

(4a) Who told Nick  
[who+name]  

(4b) Who did Nick tell  
[name+who]  

(4c) Which of the men told Nick  
[which+name]  

(4d) Which of the men did Nick tell  
[name+which]  

(4e) Nick told someone  
[name+someone]  

(4f) Someone told Nick  
[someone+name]

**Conclusions.** We replicated Kaiser et al.’s opposing subject/object and source/perceiver biases (with an extension to passives), but also found a shared a dislike of unspecified, non-POV antecedents: Interpretation of pronouns and reflexives is guided by some shared and some non-overlapping constraints, compatible with a multiple-constraint account (e.g. Kaiser & Trueswell, 2008). The finding that perspective-related factors ignore the pronoun/reflexive distinction (treat both the same), while syntactic and semantic factors influence pronouns and reflexives differently, suggests that perhaps the relevant perspective/Point-of-View representations are more cognitively general and less tied to linguistic details (e.g. pronoun-vs.-reflexive difference) than syntactic/semantic representations are.

**References:**