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Agreement attraction: Roles of active dependencies and attractor position

Patrick Sturt 1  Nayoung Kwon 2
patrick.sturt@ed.ac.uk
1University of Edinburgh
2Konkuk University

Background

- Subject-verb number agreement is affected by attraction (e.g. Wagers et al (2009, JML); Lago et al (2015, JML)).
- Processing difficulty for ungrammatical agreement is reduced in presence of matching attractor.

Easier (matching distractor) [from Lago et al, 2015]
The players that the coach were always praising very enthusiastically decided to leave the team.

Harder (mismatching distractor) [from Lago et al, 2015]
The player that the coach were always praising very enthusiastically decided to leave the team.

- In cue-based retrieval models (e.g. Lewis & Vasishth, 2015, Cognitive Science), this attraction effect is due to occasional mis-retrieval of the matching distractor (e.g. players).

Is attraction affected by the “active” status of a distractor?
- The widows said that the nurse were reluctant to work long shifts.
- The widows who said that the nurse were reluctant to work … VERB …

Is attraction affected by relative order of distractor & target?
- The widows said that the nurse most definitely were reluctant to work …
- The nurse who the widows relied on definitely were reluctant to work …

Experiment 1: Inactive, non-intervening distractor

1a. Ungrammatical: Matching distractor
The widows said that the nurse most definitely/ were/ reluctant/ to work/ long shifts.

1b. Ungrammatical: Mismatching distractor
The widow said that the nurse most definitely/ were/ reluctant/ to work/ long shifts.

1c. Grammatical
The widow said that the nurses most definitely/ were/ reluctant/ to work/ long shifts.

Experimental details (applies to all 4 Exps)
- Critical verb (were) identical in all three conditions
- Items adapted from Dillon et al (2013, JML)
- Design focused on attraction in ungrammatical sentences, so included only one grammatical condition
- 16 items per condition (48 items overall), so reasonable power to detect effect
- 39 participants; 48 sentences; Eyelink 1000
- Analysis concentrated on GO-PAST:
  - Sum of fixation durations from first entry into the region from left to first exit to right
  - Analysis used LMER on combined region (“relucatant” + “to work”), including region as a factor.

Experiment 2: Active, non-intervening distractor

1a. Ungrammatical: Matching distractor
The widows who said that the nurse most definitely/ were/ reluctant/ to work/ long shifts had become quite annoyed.

1b. Ungrammatical: Mismatching distractor
The widow who said that the nurse most definitely/ were/ reluctant/ to work/ long shifts had become quite annoyed.

1c. Grammatical
The widow who said that the nurses most definitely/ were/ reluctant/ to work/ long shifts had become quite annoyed.

Experiment 3: Intervening Subject distractor

1a. Ungrammatical: Matching distractor
The nurse who the widows relied on definitely/ were/ reluctant/ to work/ long shifts.

1b. Ungrammatical: Mismatching distractor
The nurse who the widow relied on definitely/ were/ reluctant/ to work/ long shifts.

1c. Grammatical
The nurses who the widow relied on definitely/ were/ reluctant/ to work/ long shifts.

Is attraction affected by any order of distractor & target?
- The widows who said that the nurse most definitely were reluctant to work …
- The nurse who the widows relied on definitely were reluctant to work …

Experiment 4: Intervening Object distractor

1a. Ungrammatical: Matching distractor
The nurse who cared for the widows definitely/ were/ reluctant/ to work/ long shifts.

1b. Ungrammatical: Mismatching distractor
The nurse who cared for the widow definitely/ were/ reluctant/ …

1c. Grammatical
The nurses who cared for the widow definitely/ were/ reluctant/ …

Results and Summary

- Attraction effect (ungrammatical-matching vs. ungrammatical-mismatching) reliable only for INTERVENING distractors (Exps 3,4), and significantly greater than for NON-INTERVENING distractors (Exps 1,2)
- No difference in (null) attraction effect as function of active status of dependency (Exp1 vs. Exp2)
- Grammaticality effect (grammatical vs. ungrammatical/mismatch) didn’t differ as a function of intervention or active status of distractor

Conclusions

- Attraction effect may be affected by decay of distractor’s activation over time (relative to target)
- Decay appears to be unaffected by whether the distractor participates in an active dependency.

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