

Accented Pronouns and Violated Expectations

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As Akmajian and Jackendoff (1970) initially noted, in English the presence of accent occasionally prevents coreference. This is shown below in (1) and (2), where accent on “he” prohibits coreference with Bill:

(1) John pushed Bill and he_{B/#J} fell.

(2) John pushed Bill and HE_{J/#B} fell.

However, it is not always possible to shift reference by using accent, as shown in (3) and (4):

(3) John saw Bill and he_{B/J} waved.

(4) # John saw Bill and HE_{B/J} waved.

Interestingly, environments where accent can be used felicitously correspond to precisely those environments where proper nouns with the same reference would also receive accent, as shown in (5) and (6):

(5) John pushed Bill and (contrary to what you might expect) JOHN/#John fell.

(6) John saw Bill and John/Bill/#JOHN/#BILL waved.

I suggest that the distinction between (2) and (4) lies in the fact that in a pushing event, the one being pushed, rather than the pusher, is expected to fall if anyone does; whereas a seeing event does not naturally prompt the expectation that one particular individual will wave. The licitness of accent depends on a contextually-generated expectation that if anyone is going to undergo a consequence, it will be some other alternative to the referent that receives the accent. The sentences in (2) and (5), then, engender a Violated Expectation Coherence Relation (Kehler 2002). The pronoun “he” in (2) and the proper noun “John” in (5) are accented for exactly the same reasons: we expect that Bill will fall, if anyone does. I suggest that an approach based on Violated Expectation can account for this class of accented pronouns, and fundamentally reduces the problem of accented pronouns to more general constraints on pronominalization and on accent placement. Moreover, such an approach makes several correct predictions that other theories do not. As a result, this account more parsimoniously and more thoroughly captures the data than previous ones.

References

Akmajian, A. and Jackendoff, R. S. (1970). Coreferentiality and stress. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 1(1):124-126.

Kehler, A. (2002). *Coherence, Reference, and the Theory of Grammar*. CSLI Publications, Stanford, California.