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Contents

Unconditional sluicing: An ellipsis identity puzzle

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Sluices can be embedded under what Rawlins (2008, 2013) calls 'unconditional' predicates such as *no(t) matter*, a construction we refer to as *unconditional sluicing* (1). (Merchant 2001 refers to them as 'concessive sluices'.) An interesting property of such sluices is that they do not have the same distribution as ordinary (merger) sluices. For example, unconditional sluices are licensed by NPI correlates (1a), unlike ordinary sluices (1b). This difference follows if unconditional sluices actually involve a predicational copula structure in the ellipsis site, rather than full isomorphic structure (Barros et al. 2014; Barros 2014), as per the continuations in (1).

(1) a. She won't talk to anyone – it doesn't matter who (✓they are / *she won't talk to)!
b. *She won't talk to anyone – but I don't know who (they are / she won't talk to)!

It is noteworthy that the putative elided copular structure from (1a) is not structurally isomorphic to any of the overt material that appears elsewhere in the sentence (see Barros et al. 2014 for related discussion). Moreover, it is not trivial to show that predicational sources fulfill a semantic identity condition either, such as Merchant's (2001) e-GIVENness. We abstract away from this issue here.

We focus on another challenge to the view that unconditional sluicing involves a copula source. The challenge comes from languages with richer morphological case-marking. In German, unconditional sluices under *egal* ('no matter') show case matching with the correlate (2a), which is typically assumed to diagnose isomorphic structure in the ellipsis site (Ross 1969; Merchant 2001). However, an overt continuation is unacceptable, as indicated by the parenthesized material in (2a). This unacceptability mirrors that seen in (1a), and suggests that we actually have an underlying copula structure, as in (2b). But as the example shows, the overt copular continuation requires nominative marking on the wh-item, differing in this respect from the sluiced example in (2a). Finally, note that ordinary sluicing is not licensed in the same context (2c).

(2) a. Er würde wirklich jed-em vertrauen, egal {wem / *wer} (*er vertrauen
he would really everyone-DAT trust, EGAL {who.DAT / *who.NOM} he trust
würde).
would
'He would really trust anyone, it doesn't matter who (*he would trust)!'

b. Er würde wirklich jed-em vertrauen, egal {*wem / wer} es ist
he would really everyone-DAT trust, EGAL {*who.DAT / who.NOM} it is.
'He would really trust anyone, it doesn't matter who they are!'

c. *Er würde wirklich jed-em vertrauen, aber ich weiß nicht wem (er vertrauen
he would really everyone-DAT trust, but I know not who.DAT he would

würde).
trust
'He would really trust anyone, but I don't know who.'

A further connectivity diagnostic comes from P-stranding. It is well-known that German does not allow P-stranding under sluicing (Merchant 2001:94), and unconditional sluicing obeys this same restriction (3).

(3) Ich muss mit jemand-em reden, egal *(mit) wem (*es ist)!
I must with someone-DAT talk EGAL with who (*it is)
'I have to talk to someone, it doesn't matter who.'

Thus, unconditional sluicing constitutes an interesting challenge, as it seems that conflicting requirements are imposed on the ellipsis site. The range of available continuations in (2) suggests that a copula structure is required. However, the remnant clearly shows connectivity effects (viz. case and P-stranding), which are typically attributed to isomorphic structure in the ellipsis site. A similar problem is discussed in Saab 2015 and Messick et al. 2016, although in these studies the data points that parallel (1a) and (2a) are arguably different, in having grammatical but contradictory overt (clausal) continuations, rather than the ill-formed ones like in (1a) and (2a). The nature of this unacceptability, and what it tells us about the content of the ellipsis site in unconditional sluicing, remains to be seen.

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