

(Bound) Pronouns in Competition: Evidence from Romanian Comprehension

OVERVIEW: In sentences like (1) and (2), Romanian pronouns *el / ea* ‘him / her’ are ambiguous between a reflexive reading (bound by *Andrei* or *every boy*) and a disjoint reading (referring to *Mihai* or *grandpa Radu*). Given that *el/ea* are not subject to strict binding constraints (like Conditions A and B), Romanian provides an opportunity to test higher-level hypotheses regarding intrasentential pronominal reference. We investigate the interpretation of *el/ea* in syntactic contexts like (1) and (2) by means of two comprehension experiments with pronouns targeting both referential (*Experiment 1*, e.g. *Andrei*) and quantified (*Experiment 2*, e.g. *every boy*) antecedents. **THEORETICAL IMPORT:** We test critical theoretical assumptions of several Binding Theories and provide evidence that: (i) binding is not preferred to other reference relations (*contra* Reinhart, 1983; Reuland, 2011, a.m.o); (ii) disjoint reference interpretations of simple pronouns are not preferred in ambiguous contexts (*contra* Levinson 1987, a.o.); (iii) complex reflexives like *el însuși* do compete with simplex pronominal forms *ea/el* (*contra* Safir, 2004, a.o.), and this competition affects the interpretation of pronouns *el/ea* ‘him/her’ in contexts in which they are ambiguous.

- (1) Acasă la *Mihai*₁, *Andrei*₂ a vorbit despre *el*_{1/2} / *el însuși*_{2/*1} / *acesta*_{1/*2}.
 home at Mihai Andrei has talked about him / him himself / this-one.MASC
 ‘At Mihai’s house, Andrei talked about him(self) / himself / this one’.
- (2) Acasă la *bunicul Radu*₁, *fiecare băiat*₂ a vorbit despre *el*_{1/2} / *el însuși*_{2/*1} / *acesta*_{1/*2}.
 home at grandpa Radu every boy has talked about him / him himself / this-one.MASC
 ‘At Mihai’s house, Andrei talked about him(self) / himself / this one’.

BINDING THEORETIC HYPOTHESES. Our experiments test three main Binding Theory hypotheses.

(i) Binding is Easy. Bound variable relations, as syntactic-semantic dependencies, are more economical than (local) coreference, which is computed at the level of discourse (Reinhart, 1983, 2006; Roelofsen, 2010; Reuland, 2001, 2011). **Hypothesis:** bound variable relations are easier to construct than other reference relations. There is experimental evidence against the *Binding is Easy* hypothesis (Frazier & Clifton, 2006; Cunnings et al, 2014), as well as experimental evidence in its favor (Koornneef, 2008; Wagers et al., 2018). For instance, Wagers et al. (2018) argue that Chamorro comprehenders adopt a bound variable interpretation (i.e. a reflexive reading as opposed to a disjoint reading) of an ambiguous pronoun “virtually by default”. **Prediction:** Under this hypothesis, we might expect the reflexive/non-reflexive ambiguity in cases like (1) and (2) to be resolved as a reflexive interpretation, since comprehenders would achieve this reading by giving the string a bound variable parse, without referring to the discourse context.

(ii) Pragmatic Listeners. Some accounts of pronominal reference (Dowty 1980; Levinson, 1987, 2000) argue that the choice between reflexive and regular pronouns is guided by pragmatic constraints. Under the assumption that speakers attempt to be maximally informative (Grice, 1975), the hearer’s strategy is to reject a reflexive interpretation of a non-reflexive pronoun. **Hypothesis:** if an unambiguously reflexive form is available, listeners reject reflexive interpretations of ambiguous pronouns. **Prediction:** Given the availability of the unambiguously reflexive *el însuși* in the case of (1) and (2), comprehenders will show an overwhelming preference for interpreting *el/ea* as disjoint in reference from the local subject.

(iii) Competing Forms: *el* vs. *el însuși*. Some accounts derive Condition B effects by means of the competition between pronouns and reflexives. Safir (2004) and Rooryck and vanden Wyngaerd (2011), for instance, assume that (a) English *himself* is a simplex reflexive (though see Ahn & Kalin (2018) for arguments that *himself* is complex), and (b) simplex reflexives are more economical than pronouns like *him*. Crucially, both Safir (2004) and Rooryck & vanden Wyngaerd (2011) stipulate that complex reflexives (like Romanian *el însuși*) do not compete with simplex pronouns (like *el*). **Hypothesis:** *Contra* Safir (2004) and Rooryck & vanden Wyngaerd (2011), we hypothesize that *el* and *el însuși* do compete. Whether this competition is modulated by economy constraints (Safir, 2004, Reuland, 2011), by pragmatic constraints (a weaker version of hypothesis (ii)), or both, the following prediction is made. **Prediction:** additional activation of *el însuși* will lead to a lower rate of reflexive interpretation of regular pronouns *el/ea* in ambiguous contexts.

