Defective intervention and interspeaker variation

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Introduction

What this talk is about

- This talk is an (early) status report on some ongoing work on defective intervention.
- I'll try and sketch what I think the core thoughts behind the project are.
- I'll also discuss some fairly sketchy thoughts based on some work over the past couple of months.

The bigger picture

- One goal: figure out if there are cases where we don't want to say "defective intervention" for things that have been analyzed as cases of such.
- Another goal: develop a theory of probing that leads us to expect such effects to exist.
- A third goal: see if the way that we account for variation between speakers w.r.t. these effects lets us understand other sorts of interspeaker variation.

Outline

- ~~Introduction~~
- The basics of defective intervention and an observation about the effect.
- A couple of sketchy thoughts about interspeaker variation
- Conclusion

The defective intervention configuration

Classic minimality effects

- Classic relativized minimality effects:

(1) a. Who did you tell to buy what?

b. *What did you tell who to buy?

(2) a. John was shown _____ a picture.

b. *A picture was shown John _____.

- Both can be thought of as involving the same abstract configuration of probe and goals.

(3) P … [… G_1 … [… G_2 …]]

- A *closeness* requirement on probing (Fitzpatrick 2002; Branan and Erlewine 2023) ensures that the probe will not be able to "see" G_2.

Defective intervention

- The analysis above has been extended to other patterns of acceptability.
- These differ from the cases discussed above in the following way: G_1 is not the same "type" of element as G_2.

(4) P … [… G_1* … [… G_2 …]]

- More specifically, G_1 does not straightforwardly participate in the type of dependency P triggers.
- Despite this, it is still considered sufficiently similar to G_2 for *closeness* to preclude P and G_2 from entering into a syntactic dependency.

An example from English

- A famous instance of defective intervention is the incompatibility of certain internal arguments with raising predicates.
- An example of this can be found in English: (Hartman 2009)

(5) a. I mentioned to John that it was raining out.

b. I mentioned it to be raining out.

c. It was mentioned to be raining out.

d. *It was mentioned to John to be raining out.

- A passive ECM verb which may in principle select a PP argument disallows subject to subject raising in the presence of such an argument.

A sketch of an analysis

- The basic idea, then, is that this is a case of defective intervention.

(6) P … [… G_1*=PP … [… G_2=DP …]]

- The PP in (6) is “sufficiently nominal” to prevent T from Agreeing with the embedded subject.
- But it’s not itself a licit target for Agree — it can’t control verbal agreement or move to the canonical subject position.

A survey of effects

- Raising constructions are not the only case where such analyses have been proposed.
- Long-distance agreement across a dative in Icelandic. Sigurðsson and Holmberg (2008)
- Restrictions on the co-occurence of focus and in-situ wh-words. Beck (2006)
- Restrictions on the Ā-extraction of non-highest DPs in a variety of languages. Branan and Erlewine (2022)
- Restrictions on the co-occurence of multiple argument clitics. Bonet (1991)
- Apparent underapplication of vowel harmony. Nevins (2010)
- …

Two hopes and a note

- One: the fact that this set of disparate effects displays the same sort of variability might make us think that there's something mechanically similar underlying them all.
- Two: we can learn something by paying attention to this sort of variability.
- Note: there are two types of interspeaker variation that we find.
  - Type 1: some speakers display the effect, and others don't.
  - Type 2: speakers who have the effect differ in their inventory of interveners.

Some thoughts and observations about these effects

Consider the defective intervention configuration once more

(7) P … [… G_1* … [… G_2 …]]

- There are at least two possibilities for where variation might be located.
- One: the probe — particularly if we follow work like Deal (2015) — might be a point of variation for whether or not the effect arises.
- Another: the defective intervener itself might be the relevant point of variation.

A thought about variation on the probe

- One point of variation involves the probe itself.
- If we live in a world like that proposed by Deal (2015), the locality profiles for different probes might vary within a given language.
- The idea would be that variation between speakers would reflect different choices for the specification of a particular probe.
- The hope would be that we can appeal to this while maintaining an understanding of why not all imaginable differences are attested.
- Here's an idea about how to constrain this by appealing to an analogical process for determining the specification of probes.

Restrictions on Tagalog Ā-extraction

- Tagalog is known to display restrictions on which arguments may be relativized or *wh*-fronted.
- One argument, the pivot is morphologically marked, and syntactically privileged in a variety of ways.

(8) a. B<um>ili ang babae ng isda
<AV> buy ANG woman GEN fish
"The woman bought a/the fish."

b. B<in>ili ng babae ang isda
<PV> buy GEN woman ANG fish
"The woman bought the fish."

- Some speakers allow only the pivot to undergo Ā-extraction.

(9) a. babae=ng [b<um>ili ng isda]
woman=LNK <AV> buy GEN fish
“woman who bought the fish”

b. *isda=ng [b<um>ili ang babae]
fish=LNK <AV> buy ANG woman
“fish that the woman bought.”

- And for cases such as the above, the judgements hold across all speakers.

How this is commonly thought of

- Pivots move to a position c-commanding all other arguments in the clause.
- The probe responsible for Ā-extraction can't look past the highest argument, regardless of whether or not it is a valid target for extraction.
- This is a case of defective intervention.
- Extraction of non-pivots is thus blocked.

A case of interspeaker variation

- One group of speakers also allow the extraction of non-agent pivots.

(10) */✓babae=ng [b<in>ili ang isda]
woman=LNK <PV> buy ANG fish
"woman who bought the fish"

- NB: even the second class of speakers don't find (10) perfect — but they find it markedly better than the first class of speakers do.
- That aside, we have a case of variation in defective intervention: the relevant probe can reach the agent for some speakers, but not others.

One way of thinking about this sort of variation

- One way we might explain this variation would be to appeal to a process of analogic for the specification of probes.
- The intuition: learners only posit novel probe specifications if they need to.
- Otherwise, they prefer to re-use the probe specification used for some other dependency in the language in question.
- If two pre-extant probe specifications are possible fits for a novel dependency, nothing forces them to choose one over the other.

Applying this to Tagalog

- Two possible probes that the probe for Ā-extraction might try to be uniform with:
  - Whichever probe is responsible for attracting pivots to a high position in the clause.
  - Whichever probe is responsible for attracting clitics to a high position in the clause.
    Note: Tagalog has a class of clitic pronouns for pivots, and a separate class of clitic pronouns for non-pivot agents.
- The latter seems reasonable given null operator analyses of the extractions in question, given well known similarities between null operators and overt weak third person pronouns.
- Applying the idea: nothing tells learners to favor one over the other, so either is in principle a valid choice.
- But the variation is constrained to fit the locality profile of other probes in the language.

A thought about variation on potential goals

- Another possible point of variation involves the defective intervener itself.
- I.e. there's some independently identifiable property or cue
- This seems to lend itself more straightforwardly to the second type of interspeaker variation.
- This way of thinking about things might also lend itself to the first sort of variation.

Icelandic defective intervention: three types of speaker

- There is a three-way population split between speakers of Icelandic for sentences like the following:

(11) a. Það finnst mörgum stúdentum tölvurnar ljótar
EXPL find.SG many students.DAT computers.NOM ugly

b. Það finnast mörgum stúdentum tölvurnar ljótar
EXPL find.PL many students.DAT computers.NOM ugly

"Many students find the computers ugly."

- Icelandic A speakers prefer (11b) over (11a).
- Icelandic B speakers vary.
- Icelandic C speakers prefer (11a) over (11b).

Icelandic: the basics of object shift

- Icelandic has a process termed Object Shift, which has an effect on word order.

(12) a. Mýs elska (marga ketti) ekki (marga ketti)
mice love (many cats) not (many cats)
"Mice do not love many cats."

b. Mýs elska (*fáa ketti) ekki (fáa ketti)
mice love (few cats) not (few cats)
"Mice do not love few cats."

- As seen above, not all arguments may undergo Object Shift.
- There are a number of additional restrictions on Object Shift, which we won't concern ourselves with today.

Object shift and Icelandic B

- Kučerová (2016) notes that whether or not a dative argument may undergo object shift correlates with whether or not it blocks agreement.

(13) a. Það finnast mörgum stúdentum tölvurnar ljótar
EXPL find.PL many students.DAT computers.NOM ugly
"Many students find the computers ugly."

b. *Það finnast fáum stúdentum tölvurnar ljótar
EXPL find.PL few students.DAT computers.NOM ugly
"Few students find the computers ugly."

- Speakers of Icelandic B vary in terms of which arguments with which sorts of modifiers they allow to undergo object shift.
- But the generalization holds across them.

Focus intervention: the basics

- Some languages don't allow a class of elements to c-command an in-situ *wh*-word.

(14) a. (nuku-lul) Minsu-nun (nuku-lul) po-ss-ni
(who-ACC) M.-TOP (who-ACC) see-PST-Q
"Who did Minsu see?"

b. (nuku-lul) Minsu-man (*nuku-lul) po-ss-ni
(who-ACC) M.-ONLY (who-ACC) see-PST-Q
"Who did only Minsu see?"

- This has been analyzed as involving defective intervention in the syntactic sense (Kim 2006), although there are many attempts to derive this particular sort of effect from interface requirements of varying sorts.

Focus intervention: freely scoping elements don't intervene

- Defining the class of interveners is tricky — there's variation between languages, and between speakers of a particular language.
- Erlewine and Kotek (2018) note the following for Japanese:
  - Elements which must outscope negation (when present) are interveners.
  - Elements which scope freely w.r.t. negation (when present) are not.
- Demirok (2021) adds the following for Turkish:
  - Elements which must be outscoped by negation (when present) are also interveners.

A tentative generalization

- If we assume that the scope facts reflect movement possibilities for the elements in question, then we might consider a generalization like the following.

(15) **A generalization about interveners:**
Arguments that are not obliged to occupy a singular position in the clause aren't interveners.

- Hopefully this generalization can be derived in a more principled way.
- Movement of interveners ameliorates defective intervention effects (McGinnis (1998) and Holmberg and Hróarsdóttir (2004))…

… but theories of that sort of amelioration don't straightforwardly extend to the case at hand.

- Another hope is that are clearer cues that an element undergoes obligatory movement.
- It would also be nice if this ends up extending to other cases of defective intervention as well.

Conclusion

Quick recap

- Defective intervention effects have a consistent signature: interspeaker variation.
- This variation has two “flavors”:
  - Variability in terms of the effect itself
  - Variability in terms of what counts as an intervener
- Bigger hope: we can learn something about syntactic dependency formation by paying attention to this variation.

Things to think about

- What should a theory of probing that gives us defective intervention effects look like?
- How do we know if variation is located on probes or on goals?
- What other properties of a language might be cues for this sort of variability?

Thanks!