

The influence of context on Principle C in German

Carla Spellerberg

Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main

carla.spellerberg@stud.uni-frankfurt.de

Up to today, the question of whether and to what extent context can diminish the impact of Principle C effects remains unanswered. Standard binding theory (Chomsky 1981) assumes that discourse-based effects do have an impact on coreference and binding, but does not elaborate further on this assumption. It is generally assumed that Principle C (as defined below) is regulated by *c-command* (Reinhart 1976, 1983).

Definition 1: Principle C: All R-expressions must be free.

Definition 2: C-command: Node A c(onstituent)-commands node B iff the branching node α_1 most immediately dominating A either dominates B or is immediately dominated by a node α_2 which dominates B, and α_2 is of the same category type as α_1 .

At the same time, there are several counterexamples to the claim that Principle C and c-command alone regulate the surfacing of Principle C effects, such as the one in (1).

(1) (Zwart 2015: e171, ex. 12)

[Context: We spent all afternoon discussing draft picks, and no one generated more heated discussion than the shortstop from Kansas, Peter. But in the end we reached a consensus.]

He₁ has a lot of talent and Peter₁ should go far. [But who needs another shortstop?]

In (1), the coindexation of *he* and *Peter* should cause a Principle C violation, making coreference between the pronoun and the R-expression impossible. It is the context around the sentence containing the critical coindexation that prevents unacceptability of the example, as Zwart (2015) argues.

While counterexamples such as (1) are frequently discussed in theoretical syntax, experimental evidence on the impact of context on Principle C is inconclusive. Experimental studies of Principle C, like the seminal work reported on in Gordon &

Hendrick (1997), finds no significant effect of a context question on Principle C and c-command.

In my talk, I present my experimental work on the influence of context on Principle C in German. Departing from the standard approach used in experimental work on Principle C, I tested data taken from Frey (1993) in a longer context instead of a simple context question, creating a plausible scenario that made it easier for the speakers in my experiment to imagine the critical item in this context. As a result, I found a significant effect of context on Principle C, an effect that is so strong that it even overrides the effect of c-command. A consequence of this finding is that my results are difficult to account for within a c-command-based theory of coreference in German such as the one in Frey (1993). I therefore present an account of my results based on Discourse Prominence Theory (Gordon & Hendrick 1998), a theory that is based on the notion of prominence instead of syntactic relations such as c-command.

References • Chomsky, Noam. 1984 [1981]. *Lectures on government and binding. The Pisa lectures*. Third revised edition. Dordrecht: Foris Publications. • Frey, Werner. 1993. *Syntaktische Bedingungen für die semantische Interpretation. Über Bindung, implizite Argumente und Skopus*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag. • Gordon, Peter C. & Randall, Hendrick. 1997. Intuitive knowledge of linguistic co-reference. *Cognition* 62. 325-370. • Gordon, Peter C. & Randall, Hendrick. 1998. The representation and processing of coreference in discourse. *Cognitive Science* 22(4). 389–424. • Reinhart, Tanya. 1976. *The syntactic domain of anaphora*. Cambridge, MA: MIT dissertation. • Reinhart, Tanya. 1983. *Anaphora and semantic interpretation*. London & Canberra: Croom Helm. • Zwart, Jan-Wouter. 2015. Precede-and-command revisited revisited. *Language* 91(3), e169-e178.