
Creativity in antecedent-target mismatches in German sluicing. A corpus study

Robin Lemke¹, Lisa Schäfer¹, Heiner Drenhaus¹, Ingo Reich¹

¹*Universität des Saarlandes*

robin.lemke@uni-saarland.de

Even though sluicing is often assumed to require identity between antecedent and target (see e.g. Merchant 2001, Barros 2014), acceptable mismatches have been reported in the literature (e.g. finiteness, polarity and tense mismatches, Kroll and Rudin 2017). Currently, this research is mostly based on introspective judgments (but see e.g. Anand et al. 2021 for English corpus data). This raises two questions: First, how frequently are sluicing mismatches actually attested? And, second, are there mismatches which have not yet been discussed in the literature?

We addressed this with a corpus study by extracting sluices from the POS-tagged section of the German reference corpus DeReKo (Kupietz and Keibel 2009). In total, we found 131 instances of sluicing, only 54 of which had an identical antecedent. While some of the mismatches can be explained by current theories of sluicing, there are 23 utterances like (1), which cannot be accounted for by any syntactic identity condition proposed in the literature.

- (1) Niederlagen schmerzen immer, egal gegen wen. (a13/aug.13661)
defeats hurt always no.matter against who

Utterances like (1) do not only lack an explicit antecedent, but their resolution is ambiguous, too. For instance, the sluice in (1) can be resolved as *against whom we played/the match was/etc..* The frequent usage of sluicing in such utterances indicates that it does not matter how exactly a sluice is resolved, as long as the message intended by the speaker is transmitted.

This suggests that an empirically appropriate sluicing theory requires a pragmatic component. However, purely pragmatic accounts probably overgenerate: For instance, like Anand et al. (2021), we did not find any voice mismatches (2), even though figuring out the intended message is intuitively easy.

- (2) *John was murdered, but I don't know who (murdered John). (Merchant 2013)

The aim of our talk is to discuss these findings against the background of current theories of sluicing and thus to get closer to an approach that explains the attested variation, but also the limits of such mismatches.

Selected references: • Anand, P., Hardt, D., & McCloskey, J. (2021). The Santa Cruz Sluicing Dataset. *Language*, 97(1):68–88. • Barros, M. (2014). *Sluicing and identity in ellipsis*. PhD thesis, Rutgers University. • Kroll, M. & Rudin, D. (2017). Identity and Interpretation: Syntactic and Pragmatic Constraints on the Acceptability of Sluicing. In *Proceedings of NELS 47*. • Merchant, J. (2001). *The syntax of silence. Sluicing, islands, and the theory of ellipsis*. Oxford.