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Self-repairs as right node raising constructions☆

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Abstract

In normal everyday speech, speakers occasionally become disfluent, mis-speak, and then correct their utterances mid-sentence. While these errors and repairs seem to be a natural case of language performance, language competence also plays an intimate role in shaping their ultimate form. Drawing on and extending insights from Levelt (1983, 1989), this paper argues that self-repairs are a species of right node raising. I demonstrate that self-repairs share many of the properties of right node raising constructions, with the resumption behaving like the shared material of right node raising. I also suggest that self-repairs may illuminate the current theoretical bind seen in the analysis of right node raising by supporting recent proposals that favor a sparse representation for right node raising constructions.

Keywords: Disfluency; Right node raising; Self-repair; Sharing constructions

1. Introduction

During conversation, speakers occasionally become disfluent, at times producing errors which they wish to correct mid-sentence. These self-repair disfluencies have received much focus from the literature on conversational analysis and dialogue modeling (Ginzburg et al., 2007; Ginzburg, 2012; Schegloff et al., 1977; Schegloff, 1987) and have featured more recently in research on language production (Blackmer and Mitton, 1991; Brédart, 1991; Engelhardt et al., 2010; Van Wijk and Kempen, 1987) and language comprehension (Bailey and Ferreira, 2003; Hemforth et al., 2007; Ferreira et al., 2004; Ferreira and Bailey, 2004; Lau and Ferreira, 2005). Less work has focused specifically on the relationship between syntax and self-repairs, particularly in the generative tradition, though as noted as early as Levelt (1983, 1989) (though see also Goodwin (1981) for insightful earlier commentary), speakers have judgments about the acceptability of self-repairs that lead them to appear to be rule-governed and suggest that such repairs are generated not only with language processing and higher-level conversational concerns in mind, but also under particular lower-level grammatical constraints. What these constraints are and how they shape the form of a self-repair is the focus of this paper. Taking Levelt's (1989) conjunction analysis as a starting point, I propose that self-repairs are related to right node raising constructions based on the many properties shared between the two construction types.[1] In analyzing self-repairs as right node raising

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[1] I adopt the term right node raising for historical reasons, as this was the original term used in the literature, but as will become clear, the proper analysis of these constructions is still under investigation, and adaptation of this term should not be taken as an endorsement of any particular theoretical approach.

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constructions, the paper adds to the empirical base of right node raising, but it also opens up a mystery for self-repairs, as the analysis of right node raising constructions is itself unclear.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses Levelt's (1989) well-formedness rule for self-repair, noting some empirical shortcomings of this analysis. Section 3 discusses right node raising constructions, their current analysis, and the similarity self-repair constructions have with them. Section 4 discusses a variety of properties possessed by right node raising and observes how these properties are shared by self-repair. Section 5 reviews current analyses for right node raising, revealing a theoretical tension currently present in the field, and section 6 tries to address how self-repairs might weigh in on the current debate. Finally, section 7 offers a brief summary and conclusion.

2. Self-repairs and Levelt's well-formedness rule

Self-repairs are constructions in which a speaker overtly produces an error that they then correct mid-sentence. An example of a self-repair is given in (1) along with useful terminology dissecting it into its critical parts. In particular, a self-repair construction consists of a reparandum, the part of an utterance spoken in error; and a repair, the part of an utterance that is to replace the reparandum. Often, a reparandum and its repair are separated by an editing term such as *no*, *uh*, or *I mean*,[2] and a repair will often repeat material from the reparandum, a phenomenon known as retracing. Finally, the sentence often carries on with a resumption, completing the self-repair.

(1) Bill said you will put, I mean, you will drop the ball on the table.
Original delivery; Edit term; Retracing; Reparandum; Repair; Resumption

Self-repairs can be distinguished from other types of disfluent utterances, including pauses, repetitions, and abandonments (Ginzburg et al., 2007; Levelt, 1983). Speakers often pause during speech production due to a variety of processing factors, including memory and attention limitations. Many types of disfluencies result in pauses which may be filled with *um* or *uh* as in (2a). While these pauses may signal linguistically relevant information (Arnold et al., 2004, 2007; Corley and Stewart, 2008), they do not correct the utterance as a self-repair does. Speakers also often repeat parts of their previous utterance when they become disfluent. Repetitions, like (2b) and (2c), retrace a speaker's previous utterance, like a self-repair; however, unlike a self-repair, no part of the retracing involves a correction in a repetition. Researchers have suggested that some of these cases of repetition may indicate the presence of so-called 'covert' repairs, which occur when the speaker catches himself before making an overt error. Since no overt error is made, it is difficult to diagnose whether these cases are true errors involving corrections or mere repetition disfluencies.[3]

(2) a. She, um, liked it.
b. She, uh, she liked it.
c. She liked the, um, the tomato.

Speakers are also known to become so disfluent that they abandon their utterance. Abandonments, like (3), are sometimes difficult to distinguish from self-repairs because they can involve edit terms and corrections similar to those found in self-repairs. In abandonment, however, the speaker fails to complete the original sentence, instead opting for a ''fresh start'' (Ginzburg et al., 2007). As such, abandonments lack a clear repair and resumption of the original sentence as found in self-repairs.

(3) It was very. . .Um, I mean, she liked it.

Clearer cases for self-repair involve overt errors and corrections. Speaker may realize they are making an error mid-word, such as (4a), and produce a correction immediately. These false starts may be analyzed as self-repairs, though for any particular false start, it may be difficult to know the content of the half-uttered word and therefore difficult to determine what the error was.[4] In (4b) for instance, we are not certain what the speaker intended as there could have been many possibilities, including *parsnips*, *pears*, *peppers*, etc.

[2] McKelvie (1998) notes that some kind of editing term, even just an extended pause, is always present. See Clark and Fox Tree (2002) and Fox Tree and Schrock (2002) for a discussion about different types and functions of edit terms.

[3] Although this paper focuses on self-repairs, repetitions like (2b) and (2c) may however still be usefully analyzed in terms of right node raising without contrast if the unacceptability of non-contrastive right node raising actually results from a pragmatic requirement. See section 4.1.3 for further discussion.

[4] False starts are also very similar to sub-word self-repairs like (20b) where a bound morpheme is produced before the utterance is interrupted and corrected.