

The Inquisitive Potential of Appositives and Sluicing

Sluicing is a kind of ellipsis requiring, at least, semantic redundancy of the ellided clause (Merchant 2001). Additionally, AnderBois (2010) posits that the antecedent clause and ellided clause must raise the same *issues* into the discourse. He characterises issues in terms of the Inquisitive Semantics (IS) framework (Ciardelli et al 2012). In IS, issues are represented by inquisitive propositions, that is, propositions which update the common ground with two or more alternatives. AnderBois’ theory of sluicing relies on notions that certain syntactic environments can close off any inquisitive potential of the clause. Primarily, he asserts that appositives lack any inquisitive potential, and therefore an appositive clause may not antecede a sluice. His prediction is that examples such as (1) are unacceptable.

(1) Joe, who once killed a man in cold blood, doesn’t even remember who.

We conducted controlled studies of the acceptability of such sentences, finding that sluicing is not categorically precluded when the antecedent is an appositive clause. Our study found that stimuli such as (1) which were judged as being as acceptable as counterparts where the sluicing antecedent is a matrix clause. Various factors contribute to acceptability, including the informativity of the *wh*-item (*which man* > *who*) and less material intervening between the appositive clause and the *wh*-item. Crucially, subjects were more willing to accept appositive antecedents to sluices if the stimulus was presented directly after a preceding context which raises an issue with which the appositive engages. Subjects gave examples like (2) high acceptability ratings.

(2) *Context*: Many confidential documents have gone missing.
Stimulus: My assistant, who was accused of losing an important paper, can’t figure out which paper.

In light of these findings, we agree with the hypothesis that sluicing requires an inquisitive antecedent, but judge AnderBois’ claim that appositives may not antecede sluices as too strong. Instead we suggest a more context sensitive model. We claim that appositives are not inherently non-inquisitive, their inquisitive potential is determined by the context—appositives are potentially inquisitive if they engage with an issue currently active in the context.

References

AnderBois, S. 2010. Sluicing as Anaphora to Issues. *SALT 20*. Ciardelli, I., J. Groenendijk and F. Roelofsen. 2012. Inquisitive Semantics. *NASSLLI 2012 Lecture Notes*. Merchant, J. 2001. *The Syntax of Silence: Sluicing, Islands, and the Theory of Ellipsis*. OUP.