

**The Application of Proximity  
Principle to Conversational Texts**

تطبيق مبدأ المجاورة على بعض  
نصوص المحادثة

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## Abstract

The principle of proximity denotes agreement of the verb with whatever noun or pronoun that closely precedes it, something in preference to agreement with the head word of the phrase. So, this principle is presented from the syntactic point of view. The present study aims at analyzing proximity principle in certain conversational texts in order to clarify grammatically acceptable cases related to this principle. This is because difficulties over concord arise when there is a conflict between grammatical concord and the principle of proximity.

The study includes two parts: theoretical and practical. The theoretical part presents an overview of the principle of proximity. It also illustrates different cases a few of which are related to this principle whereas others involve problems that conflict with grammatical concord. The practical part is devoted to the application of proximity principle to certain conversational texts.

The study has arrived at certain conclusions, the most important ones of which are: First, one must resume to proximity principle when the disjunctive or connects two noun phrases that are different in number, the verb agrees with the closest noun. Second, the principle of proximity is operative when the coordinator and connects two antecedents that are different in gender, the selection of the relative pronoun must agree with the preceding antecedent in terms of gender.



## ملخص البحث

يشير مبدأ المجاورة إلى توافق الفعل مع أي اسم أو ضمير يسبقه ، بدلا من التوافق مع الكلمة الرئيسية للمركب . وهكذا قُدم هذا المبدأ من وجهة النظر التركيبية . تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى تحليل مبدأ المجاورة في بعض نصوص المحادثة لغرض توضيح الحالات المقبولة نحويًا والتي تعود لهذا المبدأ وذلك لأن صعوبات التوافق تزداد عندما يكون هناك تعارض بين التوافق النحوي ومبدأ المجاورة .

تحتوي هذه الدراسة على جزأين: نظري وعملي . يعرض الجزء النظري منها نظرة حول مبدأ المجاورة ، ويوضح الحالات المختلفة التي يتعلق القليل منها بهذا المبدأ ، في حين تشتمل الحالات الأخرى على المشاكل التي تتعارض مع التوافق النحوي . خُصص الجزء العملي لتطبيق مبدأ المجاورة على بعض نصوص المحادثة .

توصلت الدراسة إلى بعض الاستنتاجات المهمة منها: أولاً ، يجب الرجوع إلى مبدأ المجاورة عندما الربط أو التخيير بين اسمين مختلفين في العدد حيث يتوافق عدد الفعل مع الاسم الأقرب إليه . ثانياً ، يعد مبدأ المجاورة فعالاً عندما يرتبط اسمان مختلفان من ناحية الجنس بواو العطف ، فيجب أن يتوافق اختيار الاسم الموصول مع جنس الاسم الأقرب الذي يعود عليه .



## 1. Principle of Proximity: An Overview

The principle of proximity, also termed 'attraction', is the tendency of the verb to agree with a noun which is closer to the verb (typically in a postmodification) but which is not the head of the subject noun phrase. This means that a preverbal local noun disagrees in number with the subject head noun. It reflects the role of intervening local noun, i.e., a noun that is embedded in a prepositional phrase or in a clause which modifies the subject that shows disagreement with the subject head noun:

### 1. The influence of some contemporary writers and fashions are allowed to enter.

Example (1) illustrates how proximity, as being the principle of closeness, results from "an incorrect unification" between the verbal segment 'are' and the plural local nouns 'writers' and 'fashions' rather than the nominal segment 'the influence' (Bock and Cutting, 1992:100).

Jespersen(1933: 345) proposes the first processing account of the principle of proximity with a preverbal local noun, venturing the hypothesis that "if the verb comes long after the noun, there is no more mental energy left to remember what the number of the person was." This suggests that the probability of finding proximity concord rather than grammatical concord increases with the distance between the subject and the verb in the uttered sentence. Such an account supposes that in cases where the subject and the verb are discontinuous, mental energy is required to keep track of the information about the agreement source until the target becomes available:

### 2. He had experience of producing voice-overs of the guises under study on national television and the naturalness of the particular recordings were validated in pilot studies.



So, the verb 'were' in (2) agrees with 'recordings' rather than the singular object 'experience'.

According to Fayol et al. (1994: 37), subject-verb agreement is computed automatically on the basis of spreading activation of the number feature from the closest preceding noun to the verb. In most cases, the subject noun immediately precedes the verb; this ensures correct and rapid agreement because it is automatic. However, when there is a preverbal local noun, activation will spread from this, too. In order to guarantee correct agreement with the head noun, a noun-automatic checking mechanism is assumed to be activated, which consumes working memory resources. A concurrent memory load task would reduce resources available for the checking procedure, and therefore increase the probability of agreement of the verb with a local noun.

### 1.1 Cases of Principle of Proximity

#### 1.1.1 Coordinated Subjects

Biber et al. (1999: 183) points out that a singular verb may be chosen in agreement with the closest of a sequence of coordinated noun phrases:

**3. Although the room and the whole house was full of really good stuff made or renovated by Daddo, secretly he valued nothing more than this bust.**

It shows that the verb 'was' agrees with 'the whole house' since the reference is to something which can be viewed as a single entity, notion or concept, i.e. 'the room' is one part of 'the whole house'.

Concerning non-appositional coordination, Quirk et al. (1985: 762) maintain that grammatical concord is clear when each member of noun phrases or clauses which are coordinated with 'either.....or' or 'whether..or' has the same number, singular or plural. However, a dilemma arises when one member is singular and the other is plural. Notionally, 'or' is disjunctive so that each member is sepa-

rately related to the verb rather than the two members being considered one unit. Because the dilemma is not clearly resolvable by the principle of grammatical concord or notional concord, recourse is generally to the principle of proximity; whatever phrase comes last determines the number of the verb:

**4.a. Either your eyesight or your brakes are at fault.**

**b. Either your brakes or your eyesight is at fault.**

In this case, the principle of proximity solves a problem especially in reference to a subject which consists of coordinated noun phrases that are different in number.

Apparently, 'neither – nor' can easily be perceived as a negative conjunction, which would explain the slight preference for the plural form. Personal pronouns, as similar to noun phrases of different numbers, pose special problems when used with correlatives. The rule of proximity would solve such problems when someone produces, for example, 'neither I nor he is...' or 'neither you nor I am...', etc. In such cases, one can resume to principle of proximity to make the verb agree with the nearest pronoun of coordinated personal pronouns which are different in number:

**5. a. Neither you nor he is able to answer the question.**

**b. Neither he nor you are able to answer the question.**

**(Celce- Murcia and Larsen- Freeman,1999: 41)**

Subject noun phrases may be linked by quasi-coordinators, i.e. prepositions( such as 'as well as, rather than, as long as') which are semantically similar to coordinators. Occasionally, the principle of notional concord, sometimes combined with principle of proximity, prompts the plural verb, especially in loosely expressed speech:

**6. The president, together with his advisors, are preparing a statement on the crisis.**

**7. An old man, as well as several women, were at home.**

Here, one can see plural concord occurs between the verbs 'are' in (6) and 'were' in (7) and the nearest noun phrases following quasi-coordinators ( Biber et al., 1999:190).

**1.1.2 Indefinite Pronouns**

Quirk and Greenbaum (1973: 179) maintain that proximity may lead to plural concord even with indefinites such as each, every, anybody, everybody and nobody; or indefinite phrases including everyone or anyone which are otherwise unambivalently singular:

**8. Nobody, not even the teachers, were pleased.**

**9. Every member of the vast crowd of 5000 people were pleased to see him.**

Such sentences might be well uttered in causal speech, most people regard them as ungrammatical because they flatly contradict grammatical concord.

In addition, when the subject is a noun phrase that is composed of 'all of., some of., half of., etc', the number of the verb is determined by the noun in the of- phrase. This indicates that its number is influenced by proximity principle. This is also true of 'lots of, heaps of, scads of , plenty of' plus a noun:

**10. Lots of people are coming to our party.(Quirk et al. 1985:765)**

Quirk and Greenbaum (1973:179) state that if a prepositional phrase with a plural complement follows an indefinite construction such as 'none of...' or 'either of...' , a plural verb is favored not only because of notional concord but because of principle of proximity:

**11. None of them are clever.**

Other, more acceptable, instances arise with expressions involving 'group', 'percent' and 'number' followed by 'of' plus a plural noun. Usually the verb is singular since 'number' or 'kind' is preceded by the definite article 'the'. However, the principle of proximity plays its role in the sense that the verb is plural since the noun 'number' or 'kind' is preceded by an indefinite article:

**12. A number of people were present.**

**13. Nearly 50% of doctors are women. (Alexander, 1988:46)**

Similarly, Biber et al. (1999: 190) point out that proximity principle often operates together with notional concord. It reinforces the use of plural concord with quantifying expressions including 'of' plus a plural noun phrase. A similar case is the use of plural concord with species nouns such as 'kind of' or 'type of':

**14. It remains to be seen what precise kind of words are agreed by the 12 heads of government.**

Such a plural concord indicated by the verb 'are' is probably due to proximity and partly to the idea that expressions with species nouns act in some respects like determiners.

Quirk et al. (1985: 763) present another case in which the mixed expressions 'one or two' and 'one and two' follow the principle of proximity in having plural concord:

**15. One or two reasons were suggested.**

Similarly, the construction 'one and' plus a fraction, decimal or percentage has a plural concord since the notion of plural applies not to at least two, but more than one. The selection of the number of the verb in the following example is also reinforced by the proximity principle:

**16. One and a half years have passed since we last met.**

### 1.1.3 Existential There

Usually a singular form of the verb 'be' follows a singular noun phrase in written English. However, in spoken conversation, one frequently finds a singular form of the verb 'be' followed by

plural noun phrases. The verb is regularly contracted and attached to the preceding existential 'there':

**17. Gary, there's apples if you want.**

**18. There's so many police forces that don't even have computers yet so they can't link in with stuff.**

In fact, such an example is somewhat more common in conversation than the standard constructions with plural verb plus a plural noun phrase. The explanation of there's is as follows: Because of the contraction, there's tends to behave as a single invariable unit for the purpose of speech processing. The connection is far less close with 'there was' which is not reduced to single syllable in speech and is not contracted in writing (Biber et al. 1999: 186).

### 1.1.4 Subject- Verb Inversion

Biber et al. (ibid:190) state that in subject-verb inversion, the verb agrees with the first noun of a series of coordinated noun phrases:

**19. Among the toads was an alcoholic field called Richard's Deane, a Divisionaire- a very high rank in the Swiss army, which only has a general in time of war- called Krueger, an international lawyer named Kips, a tax advisor, Monsieur Belmont, and an American woman with blue hair called Mrs. Montgomery.**

Here, the verb 'was' agrees with the first noun phrase 'an alcoholic field' only when there is subject- verb inversion.

Quirk et al. (1985:763) point out that there are certain examples which are far more problematic. It is not always clear which singular element in the sentence triggers the singular verb form. In many

cases, the supposed triggering element is not very near. Also, not only the apparent triggering element is not very near, it is separated from the verb by a plural element, too:

**20. I rather suspect that these speculations about the otherwise quite surprising appeal of environmentalist views has more than a little truth to it.**

**21. Examples of such tasks, including some from the previous list of life tasks, is displayed in Table 11.1.**

So, one can assume that 'appeal' in (20) and 'list' in (21) account for the singular verb, despite the greater proximity of plural expressions.

### 1.1.5 Possessive Pronoun/ Antecedent Concord

Proximity principle can be also seen in relation to pronoun/ antecedent concord which is analogous to subject- verb agreement. Basically, the pronoun and its antecedent must agree in number, person and gender. The problem with pronoun/ antecedent agreement occurs with sentences of coordinated phrases:

**22. Either some cats or a dog has made its home in this area.**

When pronouns' antecedents are joined by 'either ---- or' or 'neither --- nor', the possessive pronoun must agree with the closest antecedent. So, the pronoun 'its' in (22) agrees with the nearest noun 'a dog' according to number (Bock and Miller, 1991: 3).

### 1.1.6 Relative Pronoun/ Antecedent Concord

One feature of the explicitness of relative clauses lies in the specifying power of the relative pronoun which shows concord with its antecedent, i.e. the preceding part of the noun phrase of which the relative clause is a post-modifier. Quirk et al.(1985: 1245-6) illustrate that gender contrast is neutralized when wh-series is replaced by 'that' or a zero relative pronoun. With coordinated antecedents of mixed gender, the choice of the relative pronoun may create a

problem. Such a problem does not arise when 'that' or zero pronoun is chosen. With wh-pronouns, principle of proximity seems to be favored:

- 23. a. She likes the people and things which amuse her most.**  
**b. She likes the things and people who amuse her most.**

Fowler (1968: 402) demonstrates that there are certain sentences which are troublesome:

- 24. (a) He is one of the best men that have ever lived.**

It is troublesome as the relative pronoun can in itself be singular or plural. In (24 a.), there are two words which could serve as antecedent to 'that', namely, 'one' and 'men'. This sentence can be re-written as:

- 24. (b) Of the best men that have ever lived, he is one.**

This shows how 'have' agrees, according to the principle of proximity, with 'men'. It also shows how wrong 'has' would be if it is used instead of 'have'.



## 2. Data Analysis

This section deals with the application of what has been presented in the theoretical part to certain English conversational texts to see how the principle of proximity works and to clarify cases in which this principle is acceptable only. The texts have been chosen from some books by Richards 2005, Richards and Long 1978, Ockenden and Jones 1982 and Harris 2002.

### Text No.1

*"Celia: Hi, Don. Where will your father spend his vacation?"*

*Don: He will go to Hawaii.*

*Celia: Are you going to travel with him.*

*Celia: I'm not sure. Either my sister or I am going to go with him."*

(Richards, 2005:47)

In this text, one can see that the positive correlative 'either .. or' connects two subjects in which the first subject is a noun phrase and the second one is a personal pronoun. In this case, the verb suits the preceding noun phrase or pronoun, whether first, second or third. As such, one can resume to principle of proximity to solve such a problem. Thus, 'am' is used to agree with 'I', the closest subject to 'am'.

### Text No. 2

*"Ryan: Working on movies must be really exciting.*

*Nina: Oh, yes. Can you tell me which type of movies and people you like more?"*

*Ryan: Well, I like people and movies which give me advice."*

(Richards, 2005: 92)



Usually the choice of the relative pronoun should agree with its antecedent according to gender. The principle of proximity can solve a problem which arises with *wh-* pronouns following two noun phrases of different genders. So, which in Ryan's speech agrees with the closest antecedent *movies* rather than *people*.

**Text No. 3**

*"Anne: I want to get a gift for a friend. Have the prices changed.*

*Assistant: Neither the prices nor the quality has changed."*

(Harris, 2002: 90)

Here, the problem arises with the negative correlative '*neither... nor*' while connecting two subjects which are different in number. So, if one of the subjects is singular and the second is plural, the verb will agree with the nearest subject to solve this problem. As such, the auxiliary verb '*has*' is used to agree with '*the quality*' the second choice and the closest one to the verb '*has*'.

**Text No. 4**

*"Tom: Look! A group of people are talking in the street.*

*Why are they moving everybody out of those houses?*

*Christina: I'm not sure. Perhaps they are going to paint the houses."*

(Richards and Long, 1979: 38)

The plural verb '*are*' in text (4) agrees with the preceding noun '*people*' rather than the singular subject. So, once the plural noun is preceded by an indefinite article plus '*number, kind or group*' and the preposition '*of*', the verb agrees with the plural noun rather than '*a group of*' which is by itself singular.

**Text No. 5**

*"Mrs. Thomas: We'd prefer to live out of town a little. We don't want to live right in the middle of town.*

*Mr. Thomas: Yes, but it should be too far. I'd prefer not to have driven too far to get to my office.*

*Agent: Well, I think I can show that one or two places are suitable."*

(Richards and Long, 1978: 55- 6)

This text shows that the mixed expression 'one or two' follow the principle of proximity in having plural concord in the sense that the agreement occurs between 'two places' and 'are'.

**Text No. 6**

*"A: What would you like to have?*

*B: I'd like two steak sandwiches and an orange juice with its pipe, please.*

*A: Ok. Sit down and I'll get them."*

(Ockenden and Jones, 1982: 82)

This text shows the role of proximity in solving a problem that occurs between the possessive pronoun and two antecedents of different numbers once they are connected by the coordinator 'and'. So, 'its', as a singular possessive pronoun, agrees with the number of the nearest antecedent 'an orange juice' rather than 'steak sandwiches'.

**Text No. 7**

*"Manager: A lot of foreign tourists come into our shop.*

*Miss Smithies: Can you speak any other foreign languages, apart from English?*

*Jenny: Well, I can speak French, and a little Japanese."*

(Richards and Long, 1978: 112)

Here, the number of the verb 'come' matches the number of 'tourists'. When the subject is composed of 'a lot of' plus a noun phrase, the number of the verb is determined by this noun phrase. This shows the influence of proximity principle.

**Text No. 8**

*"Anne: Look! The hat and the gloves are really nice.*

*Sue: Which colour do you prefer?*

*Anne: I prefer the red one.*

*Seller: Can you tell me whether the hat or the gloves are*

*red?"* (Richards, 2005: 19)

In this text, one can see that the verb 'are' takes the number of the nearest alternative the gloves from the choice the hat or the gloves. The principle of proximity in this case is workable since it solves the problem of disjunction of noun phrases that have different numbers.

**Text No. 9**

*"Carla: Look at all those dead fish! What do you think happened?*

*Andy: Well, there's a factory outside town that's pumping chemicals into the river.*

*Carla: How can they do that? Isn't that against the law?*

*Andy: Yes, it is. But lots of companies ignore those laws."*

Here, the verb 'ignore' in Andy's last speech agrees, according to proximity principle, with the number of the preceding noun 'companies'. This text shows that when the subject is a noun phrase that is composed of one of the quantities plus a noun, the number of the verb is determined by the number of the preceding noun phrase.

**Text No. 10**

*"Marcos: So do you like being an only child?"*

*Mei-Li: Of course. I get all my parent's attention.*

*Marcos: Yeah, I share my parent's attention with five other people.*

*Mei-Li: Do you know that a small percent of Japanese families have more than three children."*

In this text, one can see that there is a proximity concord between the verb 'have' in Mei-Li's last speech and the plural noun phrase 'Japanese families' rather than 'a small percent of'. This is because the noun phrase 'small percent' is preceded by an indefinite article

## Conclusions

The principle of proximity is the tendency of either the verb to agree with the nearest noun phrase or pronoun functioning as a subject in terms of number, or the relative/ possessive pronoun to agree with the closest antecedent according to gender and number.

Conversational texts reveal that one can resume to principle of proximity in the following cases: First, when the coordinator and, the disjunctive or, and the correlatives either...or, whether... or and neither ...nor connect two noun phrases or pronouns that are different in number, the verb agrees with the closest(preceding) noun or pronoun. Here, proximity is operative and is a must. Consequently, when there is a possibility to choose one of two coordinated antecedents which differ in gender, one can select the relative or possessive pronoun that goes with the gender of the nearest antecedent.

Second, the principle of proximity have plural concord with a prepositional phrase that has a plural noun once this phrase is preceded by the indefinite article plus 'number, kind, percent, form, group,' etc. Similarly, there is a plural concord with indefinite expressions such as 'one or two', 'one and two', and 'one and' plus a fraction, a decimal or a percentage.

Third, when the subject consists of one of the indefinite pronouns such as all of, none of, neither of, either of, some of, half of, heaps of, lots of, plenty of, or scads of plus a noun, the number of the verb is determined by the number of the noun following of. So, recourse is generally to principle of proximity.



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