



## The Reciprocal Interpretation of the *Do so* Anaphor in English

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### ABSTRACT

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This study examines a novel interpretation of the English *do so* anaphor—namely, the *reciprocal reading*. While prior research has established that *do so* in English permits the canonical strict and sloppy readings, recent work on the Korean *kule*-anaphor (*do so* anaphor) (Lee 2025) has identified a third interpretation in which the thematic roles of subject and object are reversed across coordinated clauses. This reciprocal interpretation—as in *The student likes the teacher, and the teacher does so, too* (interpreted as *The student and the teacher like each other*)—cannot be reduced to either the strict or sloppy readings, as it reflects a bidirectional relation between the individuals involved. The present study first examines whether this reciprocal reading is also possible in English *do so* constructions, and if so, under what semantic conditions it arises. Through a controlled experiment, the study finds that the reciprocal reading in English received relatively high acceptability scores, albeit with weaker constraints than in Korean. These findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of verbal anaphora by challenging purely syntactic accounts and suggesting a role for conceptual and discourse-level processes. They also bear typological significance, showing that reciprocal interpretations may form part of a broader cross-linguistic pattern in *do so*-type constructions.

### KEYWORDS

*do so* anaphor, strict reading, sloppy reading, reciprocal reading, coreference, converseness, experiment, English

## 1. Introduction

It is well-known in the literature that the *do so* anaphor in English basically gives rise to two types of readings: the strict reading and the sloppy reading, as illustrated in (1) (see, e.g., Bolinger 1970, Cornish 1992, Culicover and Jackendoff 2005, Fiengo and Mary 1994, Hankamer and Sag 1976, Houser 2010, Huddleston and Pullum 2002, J.-S. Kim 2010, Kehler and Ward 1999, Lakoff and Ross 1976, Miller 2013, Wee 2020, Ross 1967, Sag 1976, Sag and Hankamer 1984, Sobin 2008, Williams 1977a).

(1) Tom likes his teacher, and Sam **does so**, too.

**1. Strict reading:** Tom likes Tom's teacher and Sam likes Tom's teacher.

**2. Sloppy reading:** Tom likes Tom's teacher and Sam likes Sam's teacher.

In the strict reading of sentence (1), the possessive pronoun *his* retains its reference to Tom, such that both Tom and Sam are said to like the same individual—Tom's teacher. In the sloppy reading, by contrast, the pronoun *his* is interpreted relative to the subject of each clause, yielding an interpretation in which Tom and Sam like their respective teachers. Korean exhibits a similar pattern with the anaphoric element *kule*, which is often translated as *do so* (see Kim 1999, Kim et al. 2020, Lee 2025, Park 2015). Like its English counterpart, the *kule*-anaphor (*do so* anaphor) permits both strict and sloppy readings. However, recent work (Lee 2025) argues that the *kule*-anaphor in Korean licenses a third, previously unrecognized reading, as illustrated in (2), which differs crucially from both the strict and sloppy interpretations.

(2) *ku haksayng-i casin-uy sensayngnim-ul cohaha-ko,*  
 the student-Nom self-Gen teacher-Acc like-and  
*ku sensayngnim-to kuleh-ta.*  
 the teacher-also do.so-Dec

'The student likes his/her teacher, and the teacher does so, too.'

**1. Strict reading:** The student<sub>1</sub> likes his/her teacher<sub>2</sub> and the teacher<sub>3</sub> likes the teacher<sub>2</sub>.

**2. Sloppy reading:** The student<sub>1</sub> likes his/her teacher<sub>2</sub> and the teacher<sub>2/3</sub> likes his/her teacher<sub>4</sub>.

**3. Reciprocal reading:** The student<sub>1</sub> likes his/her teacher<sub>2</sub> and the teacher<sub>2</sub> likes the student<sub>1</sub>.

In (2), the sentence permits the two canonical readings: the strict and sloppy readings, just as in English. Crucially, however, it also allows a third interpretation in which the student likes the teacher and the teacher likes the student. This reading is neither strict nor sloppy reading, as the possessive interpretation alone cannot account for it. Rather, it reflects a reversal of thematic roles across the two clauses, suggesting a bidirectional or mutual relationship between the referents. This previously underrecognized reading—termed the *reciprocal reading* (Lee 2025)—adds a novel interpretive dimension to the Korean *kule*-anaphor.

This raises a natural question: Does the English *do so* anaphor also permit a reciprocal reading? The first goal of this paper is thus to investigate whether the reciprocal reading is available for the English *do so* construction. If it is indeed available, the second goal is to identify the interpretive conditions under which this reading arises. Together, these inquiries aim to deepen our understanding of the cross-linguistic semantics of verbal anaphora and the factors that constrain their interpretation.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the reciprocal reading of the Korean *kule*-anaphor and outlines two potential semantic conditions of this reading. Section 3 presents an experiment

investigating the English *do so* anaphor. Section 4 discusses two implications of the reciprocal reading, one theoretical and the other typological. Section 5 concludes the paper.

## 2. Previous Study

This section reviews prior research on the reciprocal reading of the Korean *kule*-anaphor. Lee (2025) provided experimental evidence suggesting that it tends to permit this reading and further examined two potential factors that may license it. A first variable is converseness (i.e., whether the subject and object in the antecedent clause are in a converse relationship, such as *student–teacher* or *buyer–seller*) and a second variable is coreference (i.e., whether the subject of the following clause can be coreferential with the object of the antecedent clause). For example, in (2), the antecedent clause features a converse relationship between the student (subject) and the teacher (object). If a person is another’s student, then the other is, by definition, that person’s teacher, and vice versa. The converse relationship remains intact even when the subject and object switch roles, as shown in (3) (Lee 2025).

- (3) *sensayngnim-i casin-uy haksayng-ul cohaha-ko*  
 teacher-Nom self-Gen student-Acc like-and  
*ku haksayng-to kuleh-ta.*  
 the student-also do.so-Dec

‘The teacher likes his/her student, and the student does so, too.’

1. **Strict reading:** The teacher<sub>1</sub> likes his/her student<sub>2</sub> and the student<sub>3</sub> likes the student<sub>2</sub>.
2. **Sloppy reading:** The teacher<sub>1</sub> likes his/her student<sub>2</sub> and the student<sub>2/3</sub> likes his/her student<sub>4</sub>.
3. **Reciprocal reading:** The teacher<sub>1</sub> likes his/her student<sub>2</sub> and the student<sub>2</sub> likes the teacher<sub>1</sub>.

This suggests that a converse relationship between the subject and object may play a crucial role in licensing the reciprocal interpretation of the Korean VP anaphor.

Second, sentence (3) allows the object in the first clause to be coreferential with the subject in the second, which seems to support the availability of the reciprocal reading. A similar coreference relation is observed in sentence (4), which also permits a reciprocal interpretation (Lee 2025).

- (4) *sensayngnim-i casin-uy haksayng-ul cohaha-ko Minji-to kuleh-ta.*  
 teacher-Nom self-Gen student-Acc like-and Minji-also do.so-Dec

‘The teacher likes his/her student, and Minji does so, too.’

1. **Strict reading:** The teacher<sub>1</sub> likes his/her student<sub>2</sub> and Minji<sub>3</sub> likes the student<sub>2</sub>.
2. **Sloppy reading:** The teacher<sub>1</sub> likes his/her student<sub>2</sub> and Minji<sub>2/3</sub> likes her student<sub>4</sub>.
3. **Reciprocal reading:** The teacher<sub>1</sub> likes his/her student<sub>2</sub> and Minji<sub>2</sub> likes the teacher<sub>1</sub>.

In sentence (4), the reciprocal interpretation appears to be possible because Minji can be construed as referring to the same individual as the student the teacher likes. This suggests that coreference between the object in the first clause and the subject in the second clause may play a critical role in allowing the reciprocal reading of the Korean *kule*-anaphor to arise.

To empirically test the role of these factors, Lee (2025) conducted an experiment examining whether the reciprocal interpretation of the *kule*-anaphor is permitted under two conditions. The results indicate that the

reciprocal reading was relatively well accepted by participants and that coreference appears to be a necessary condition for this reading, whereas converseness had little effect. These findings are illustrated in Figure 1 below, as presented in Lee (2025).

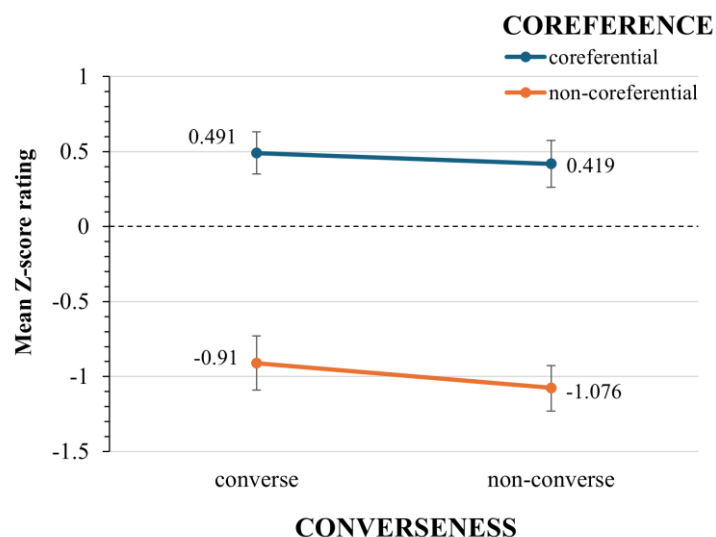


Figure 1. Mean Condition Ratings with 95% Confidence Interval Error Bars (Korean)

The present study investigates whether the English *do so* anaphor exhibits a similar interpretive pattern.

### 3. An Experiment

An experiment was conducted on the English *do so* anaphor, the counterpart to the Korean *kule*-anaphor, with two primary goals: (i) to investigate whether the reciprocal reading is possible for the *do so* anaphor, and (ii) to identify the semantic factors that license this reading. Specifically, the experiment examined the roles of two variables previously investigated in Korean: *coreference* and *converseness*. The experimental results suggest that the *do so* anaphor largely parallels the *kule*-anaphor in its interpretive possibilities. Like its Korean counterpart, *do so* tends to permit a reciprocal interpretation, and the presence of coreference between the first-clause object and the second-clause subject supports the availability of this reading. In contrast, converseness—the presence of a naturally converse relationship between the arguments—has little impact. However, a key cross-linguistic difference emerged: while coreference appears to be necessary for the reciprocal reading in Korean, its role in English is comparatively weaker.

#### 3.1 Design

The study utilized a 2 x 2 repeated-measures factorial design, examining the influence of two independent variables: COREFERENCE (with *coreferential* and *non-coreferential* levels) and CONVERSENESS (with *converse* and *non-converse* levels). (5) provides a sample set of test items used in the experiment.

- (5) a. **Condition 1: coreferential | converse**  
 [Situation: Mary dislikes her senior. The senior dislikes Mary. Neither of them dislikes anyone else.]  
 Sentence: “Mary dislikes her senior, and the senior does so, too.”
- b. **Condition 2: coreferential | non-converse**  
 [Situation: Mary dislikes a man. The man dislikes Mary. Neither of them dislikes anyone else.]  
 Sentence: “Mary dislikes a man, and the man does so, too.”
- c. **Condition 3: non-coreferential | converse**  
 [Situation: Mary dislikes her senior. Mary’s younger sister dislikes Mary. Neither of them dislikes anyone else.]  
 Sentence: “Mary dislikes her senior, and Mary’s younger sister does so, too.”
- d. **Condition 4: non-coreferential | non-converse**  
 [Situation: Mary dislikes a man. Mary’s younger sister dislikes Mary. Neither of them dislikes anyone else.]  
 Sentence: “Mary dislikes a man, and Mary’s younger sister does so, too.”

In the experiment, the *coreferential* conditions were set up so that the object in the first clause of a sentence and the subject in the second clause could refer to the same individual. For example, in sentence (5a), *her senior* (object of the first clause) and *the senior* (subject of the second clause) can be interpreted as coreferential. In contrast, the non-coreferential conditions clearly involved referentially distinct individuals. In sentence (5c), for instance, *her senior* and *Mary’s younger sister* unambiguously point to different people. The *converse* conditions involved cases where the subject and object of the first clause stood in a converse relationship. In sentence (5a), *Mary* and *her senior* form such a pair: if someone is Mary’s senior, Mary is automatically their junior, and vice versa. By contrast, sentence (5b)—involving *Mary* and *a man*—lacks this inherent converse relation.

The experiment’s stimulus list began with three instructional items. Following these, participants were presented with a pseudo-randomized sequence of 16 test items (4 sets of lexically distinct sentences x 2 levels of COREFERENCE x 2 levels of CONVERSENESS) and 45 filler items. An alternative version of the stimulus list, in which the order of the pseudo-randomized sequence was reversed, was created to counterbalance potential order effects. As a result, each participant viewed a total of 64 items.

### 3.2 Participant and Procedure

Thirty native speakers of English were recruited for the study via the Prolific platform. Participants completed the experimental task using a Google Form, with 15 participants assigned to each of the two stimulus lists. Participants were instructed not to discuss the contents with others and to complete the questionnaire in a quiet environment. They were also informed that there were no right or wrong answers; what mattered was their own judgments. In each trial, participants rated the acceptability of a sentence within a given context on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated “definitely unsuitable” and 7 indicated “definitely suitable.” Compensation was provided through Prolific upon completion of the survey, with each participant receiving £1.50 (approximately \$1.90 USD).

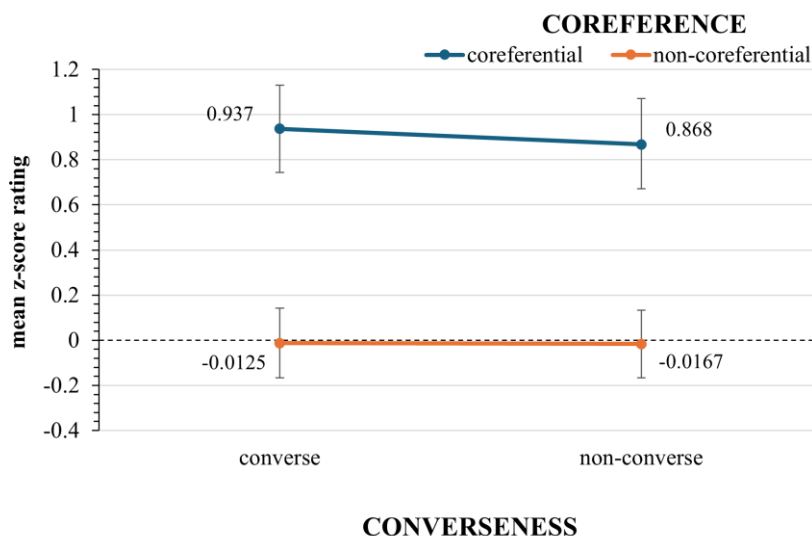
### 3.3 Results

The experimental results, z-transformed to control for individual differences in scale use, are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Condition Ratings (Z-transformed) in English**

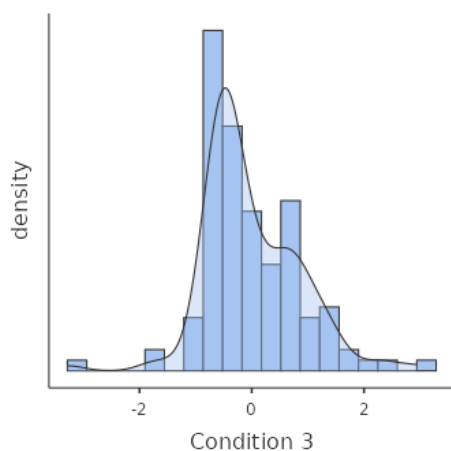
	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Condition 1	120	0.937	1.07	0.744	1.13
Condition 2	120	0.868	1.09	0.671	1.07
Condition 3	120	-0.0125	0.853	-0.167	0.142
Condition 4	120	-0.0167	0.83	-0.167	0.133

Table 1 shows that only Conditions 1 (coreferential | converse) and 2 (coreferential | non-converse) produced mean acceptability ratings well above zero. This indicates that the reciprocal reading is substantially more acceptable only when coreference is present, regardless of whether a converse relation exists between the arguments. By contrast, mean acceptability ratings for Conditions 3 (non-coreferential | converse) and 4 (non-coreferential | non-converse) fell slightly below zero, indicating that the reciprocal interpretation is disfavored in the absence of coreference, as illustrated in Figure 2 with their mean acceptability ratings and 95% confidence intervals.

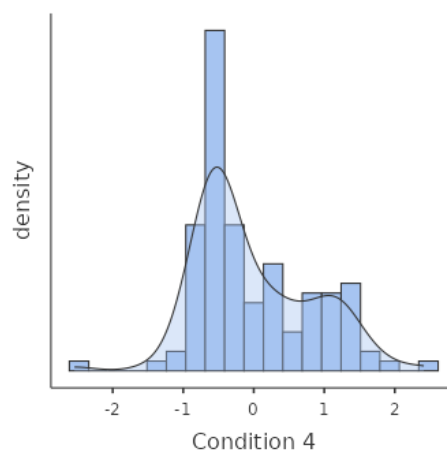


**Figure 2. Mean Condition Ratings with 95% Confidence Interval Error Bars (English)**

The 95% confidence intervals for Conditions 3 (non-coreferential | converse) and 4 (non-coreferential | non-converse) crossed the zero line, indicating that a reciprocal reading of the *do so* anaphor is not clearly ruled out. Histograms with density lines for Conditions 3 and 4 are presented below:



**Figure 3. Distribution of Acceptability Ratings for Condition 3**



**Figure 4. Distribution of Acceptability Ratings for Condition 4**

These histograms suggest that reciprocal readings in these conditions tend to receive ratings below zero, although the effect is not strong enough for the relevant sentences to be judged clearly unacceptable.

To assess the impact of the two manipulated factors, a  $2 \times 2$  repeated-measures ANOVA (analysis of variance) was conducted with COREFERENCE (with two levels: *coreferential* and *non-coreferential*) and CONVERSENESS (with two levels: *converse* and *non-converse*) as within-subjects factors. The analysis showed a highly significant main effect of COREFERENCE,  $F(1,119) = 95.338, p < .001$ . This result indicates a strong influence of coreference on participants' acceptability judgments of reciprocal readings. In contrast, there was no significant main effect of CONVERSENESS,  $F(1,119) = 0.226, p = .635$ , nor a significant interaction between COREFERENCE and CONVERSENESS,  $F(1,119) = 0.2, p = .655$ . These results suggest that the two factors operated independently and that only coreference substantially affected the availability of the reciprocal reading.

In sum, findings from the experiment suggest that the *do so* anaphor tends to permit a reciprocal reading under certain conditions, as reflected in the relatively high mean acceptability scores for Condition 1 ( $M = 0.937$ ) and Condition 2 ( $M = 0.868$ ). While coreference plays a significant role in licensing this interpretation, it does not appear to be strictly required. In addition, converseness has little effect on its acceptability.

One limitation of the present study lies in its relatively small scale: only 30 participants were included, and the experiment involved just 16 test items. Accordingly, the findings should be viewed as preliminary. A more comprehensive follow-up study with a larger sample size and a broader set of stimuli would be necessary to confirm and refine these results.

#### 4. Implications

The presence of a reciprocal interpretation for the *do so* anaphor has important implications for both the theoretical analysis of *do so* constructions and their typological characterization.

#### 4.1 Theoretical Implications

Anaphor can be classified into two major types: deep anaphor and surface anaphor (see Hankamer and Sag 1976 for the distinction between deep and surface anaphora; see also related discussions in Depiante 2000, Houser 2010, Thompson 2014, Williams 1977b, among others). Surface anaphora involves syntactic identity or recoverability from a linguistic antecedent, typically requiring a structurally parallel constituent. In contrast, deep anaphora does not depend on such surface syntactic recoverability, instead drawing on discourse context, inference, or conceptual reconstruction. The *do so* anaphor is traditionally analyzed as an instance of surface anaphor or VP anaphor, based on the assumption that it substitutes for a full verb phrase in the antecedent clause. This analysis may be motivated in cases of the canonical strict and sloppy readings, where *do so* refers back to an antecedent VP in a structurally recoverable manner.

However, the reciprocal reading poses a challenge to this traditional view. In cases where *do so* gives rise to a reciprocal interpretation, the anaphor does not appear to retrieve a syntactically parallel VP from the antecedent clause. Instead, the interpretation relies on a reversal of thematic roles, rather than syntactic identity. Consider (5a), repeated in (6).

(6) **Condition 1: coreferential | converse**

[Situation: Mary dislikes her senior. The senior dislikes Mary. Neither of them dislikes anyone else.]

Sentence: “Mary dislikes her senior, and the senior does so, too.”

In this example, the antecedent VP is *dislikes her senior*. However, under the reciprocal reading, the second clause is interpreted as *the senior dislikes Mary*, a proposition that is neither structurally recoverable from nor semantically identical to the antecedent VP. That is, there is no constituent in the first clause that corresponds to the meaning required in the second clause. This interpretive shift cannot be explained by standard VP identity or variable binding mechanisms assumed in surface anaphora.

Such data suggest that the reciprocal reading of *do so* is not derived through syntactic reconstruction, but rather through higher-level semantic or conceptual operations—possibly involving discourse coherence, thematic role inversion, and pragmatic enrichment. In this sense, *do so* appears to function more like a deep anaphor, accessing event or situation-level representations rather than syntactic VP antecedents.

This analysis has important implications for theories of anaphora. It suggests that the *do so* construction, while often treated as a straightforward case of surface VP anaphor, may span both types of anaphora depending on the interpretive context. Specifically, the canonical strict and sloppy readings reflect structurally recoverable, surface-level anaphoric resolution. In contrast, the reciprocal reading reveals *do so*'s capacity to participate in deep, inferential anaphora. This challenges uniform syntactic accounts of *do so* and calls for a more nuanced theory that accommodates both structural and conceptual mechanisms of anaphoric resolution.

#### 4.2 Typological Implications

The experimental data suggest that the English *do so* anaphor generally allows a reciprocal reading, much like its Korean counterpart, the *kule*-anaphor. This finding is typologically significant, as it indicates that the availability of reciprocal interpretations in verbal anaphora is not limited to a single language or language family. Rather, it may reflect a more general interpretive potential inherent in *do so*-type constructions across languages.

Previous studies on verbal anaphora have primarily focused on the canonical strict and sloppy readings, in which anaphoric resolution operates through VP identity or variable binding. The present findings extend this landscape by identifying a reciprocal reading in English. In Korean, the reciprocal reading is more tightly regulated, with coreference serving as a necessary condition for the reading. In contrast, English displays greater interpretive flexibility: while coreference facilitates the reciprocal reading, it does not appear to be strictly necessary.

These cross-linguistic differences suggest that while the interpretive space for reciprocal readings may be broadly available across languages, the mechanisms that license them—and the strength of the constraints involved—vary typologically. From a broader typological perspective, the comparison between Korean and English opens new avenues for exploring how languages encode mutual or bidirectional relations through event anaphora, particularly in the absence of overt expressions of reciprocity.

Future cross-linguistic research should investigate whether other languages with verbal anaphors also permit the reciprocal reading, and under what syntactic or semantic conditions this interpretation arises. Such work would contribute to a more comprehensive typology of verbal anaphora, offering deeper insights into how the interpretation of anaphoric expressions varies and is constrained across languages.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has investigated a previously underexplored interpretation of the English *do so* anaphor and examined its cross-linguistic parallels with the Korean *kule*-anaphor (*do so* anaphor). While *do so* has traditionally been analyzed as a VP anaphor that typically yields strict and sloppy readings, the present experimental findings demonstrate that it can also allow a third interpretation—namely, the *reciprocal reading*—in which the thematic roles of subject and object are reversed across coordinated clauses. Although this reciprocal reading has been previously documented only for Korean, the results reported here indicate that English likewise supports this interpretation under specific conditions.

Two semantic factors—coreference and converseness—were tested to determine their role in licensing the reciprocal reading. The results indicate that coreference significantly facilitates the reciprocal interpretation, while converseness plays no substantial role. The overall patterns are broadly similar across Korean and English. However, the role of coreference differs typologically: in Korean, it appears to serve as a strict requirement for the reciprocal reading, whereas in English, it appears not to be strictly required, though it significantly influences interpretation.

These findings have two important implications. Theoretically, they challenge purely syntactic accounts of *do so* anaphora by showing that its interpretation may involve conceptual role-reversal and event-level inference—features typically associated with deep anaphora. Typologically, they suggest that the reciprocal reading is not unique to Korean but instead reflects a broader, cross-linguistically available interpretive mechanism for expressing reciprocity.

Further cross-linguistic research on verbal anaphora is needed to determine whether similar reciprocal readings arise in other languages and to advance our understanding of how syntax and semantics interact in anaphoric constructions. Such research would contribute to the development of a more nuanced typology of verbal anaphora—one that accounts for both cross-linguistic commonalities and language-specific variation.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Tertiary