

Article

# Reflexivization and *Mình*-Exceptional Local Binding by a Monomorphemic Anaphor?

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**Abstract:** This paper considers the distribution of the anaphor *mình* in Vietnamese and whether *mình* can be locally bound in the absence of the reflexivizing element *tự*. The patterning of Vietnamese *mình* poses a potential challenge to theories of binding based on claims that anaphors that are monomorphemic reject local binding and are unable to reflexivize a predicate. The paper reports on an experiment designed to probe judgements of *mình* in local reflexive interpretations and concludes that, for many speakers from different regions of Vietnam, *mình* in object position may be interpreted reflexively with the subject of the same clause, without the need for *tự*. On the basis of patterns involving ellipsis and quantificational subjects, it is further shown that this is a genuine binding relation and not simple co-reference. Such conclusions are noted to have significant consequences for certain approaches to binding.

**Keywords:** binding; monomorphemic anaphors; co-reference; reflexivizers

## 1. Introduction

The inspiration and starting point for the current paper is an important, extensive study of anaphora in Vietnamese by [Đoàn \(2022\)](#): *Anaphoric dependencies in Vietnamese—a syntactic approach*. In this work, [Đoàn](#) describes how the anaphor *mình* is frequently paired with a pre-verbal reflexivizing morpheme, *tự*, and presents the claim in (1):

- (1) ‘... the anaphor *mình* cannot be locally bound unless accompanied by the element *tự*.’  
([Đoàn, 2022](#), p. 114).

An illustration of this restriction is shown in (2) below. In (2a), *tự* is not present, and a reflexive interpretation between the subject and object of the embedded clause is not available—though a long-distance anaphoric relation is possible between *mình* and the subject of the higher clause.<sup>1</sup> In (2b), by way of contrast, *tự* occurs in the embedded clause, and this is shown to enable (and also force) a reflexive interpretation between *mình* and the subject of the embedded clause.

- |       |   |       |                  |              |                        |
|-------|---|-------|------------------|--------------|------------------------|
| (2) a | Nam <sub>i</sub>  | nghĩ  | Lan <sub>k</sub> | ngưỡng mộ    | mình <sub>i/*k</sub> . |
|       | Nam   | think | Lan              | admire       | body.                  |
|       | ‘Nam thinks Lan admires him/*herself.’                                      |       |                  |              |                        |
| b     | Nam <sub>i</sub>  | nghĩ  | Lan <sub>k</sub> | tự ngưỡng mộ | mình <sub>*i/k</sub> . |
|       | Nam   | think | Lan              | tu admire    | body.                  |
|       | ‘Nam thinks Lan admires *him/herself.’ ( <a href="#">Đoàn, 2022</a> , p. 3) |       |                  |              |                        |

A consideration of the broader patterning of *mình* might seem to suggest, however, that the characterization in (1) is actually too strict. Examples can regularly be found where *mình* is used to refer back to a local subject without the accompaniment of *tự*, as in (3):<sup>2</sup>



Academic Editors: Trang Phan, Nigel Duffield and Tim Chou

Received: 14 October 2024  
Revised: 11 February 2025  
Accepted: 16 February 2025  
Published: 27 February 2025

**Citation:** Simpson, A., & Pham, L. (2025). Reflexivization and *Mình*-Exceptional Local Binding by a Monomorphemic Anaphor? *Languages*, 10(3), 44. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages10030044>

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- (3a) Mịch rất hối hận giận mình sao đã quá thật thà  
 Mich very regret mad REFL why PST too honest  
 đến nỗi thú thật với Long là đi ăn trộm.  
 that confess with Long is go stealing.  
 ‘Mịch deeply regretted angering herself for being so honest that she confessed to Long about stealing.’  
 Source: Giông tố (1936). Vũ Trọng Phụng. Tuyển tập Vũ Trọng Phụng, tập 1. Nhà xuất bản Văn học, Hà Nội, 1996.
- (3b) Cô cố giấu mình giữa đám đông đảo  
 She try hide REFL middle crowd  
 ‘She tried to hide herself in the noisy crowd.’  
 Source: Thời xa vắng, Lê Lựu.
- (3c) Còn lão Hứng thất kinh sinh ra hành tội con mèo vô tội  
 As old Hung terrified so frustrate cat innocent  
 để trấn an mình.  
 to calm REFL.  
 ‘As for old Hứng, terrified, he took his frustration out on an innocent cat to calm himself down.’  
 Source: Côi cút giữa cảnh đời (1988). Ma Văn Kháng.
- (3d) Biết bao kẻ đang hăm hở chứng tỏ mình rên lên  
 Many people PROG eager prove REFL groan  
 như vậy.  
 same.  
 ‘Many people, eager to prove themselves, are groaning the same way!’  
 Source: Cơ hội của Chúa (3/1989–21/2/1997). Nguyễn Việt Hà.
- (3e) Biết bao người anh tuấn còn chôn mình trong  
 Many people handsome still bury REFL in  
 lau sậy để đợi lúc gió mây.  
 reeds to wait when it’s cloudy.  
 ‘So many handsome men still buried themselves in the reeds to wait for the cloudy weather.’  
 Source: Phan Khôi. Tác phẩm đăng báo 1928. Lại Nguyên Ân sưu tầm, biên soạn. Nhà xuất bản Đà Nẵng–2001. (lainguyenan.free.fr)

Furthermore, the judgements of sentences with *tự*-less local binding with *mình* in [Đoàn \(2022\)](#) are not necessarily shared by all speakers. The author of the present paper who is a native speaker of Vietnamese finds the following examples from [Đoàn \(2022\)](#) to be acceptable with a local binding relation between *mình* and the subject of the sentence, although such a dependency is starred as ungrammatical in [Đoàn \(2022\)](#):

- (4) Nam<sub>k</sub> chỉ trích mình<sub>k</sub>  
 Nam criticize body  
 ‘Nam criticizes himself.’ (\* in [Đoàn, 2022](#), p. 71)
- (5) Lan<sub>k</sub> trừng phạt mình<sub>k</sub>  
 Lan punish body  
 ‘Lan punished herself.’ (\* in [Đoàn, 2022](#), p. 4)
- (6) Người đàn ông<sub>k</sub> đã khen mình<sub>k</sub>.  
 CL man PST praise body.  
 ‘The man praised himself.’ (\* in [Đoàn, 2022](#), p. 116)

In a subsequent paper focused on long-distance binding in Vietnamese, [Đoàn et al. \(2023, p. 1\)](#) acknowledge the following:

‘Like many languages, Vietnamese is not entirely homogeneous. The data in this article reflect the language spoken in the Center/Middle of the country . . . The reader should be aware that speakers from the Northern region or the Southern region might diverge in some of their judgments. So far, a comprehensive study of the variation within Vietnamese is not available.’

This raises the possibility that regional variation in the use of *mình* might perhaps underlie differences in acceptability judgments with examples that appear to violate (1), an issue examined in the current paper.

The question of whether there are speakers who permit local binding with *mình* in the absence of *tr* also has a broader significance, extending beyond Vietnamese to the cross-linguistic typology of binding relations and general theories of anaphora and reflexivity. It has frequently been suggested ([Cole et al., 1990](#); [Reinhart & Reuland, 1993](#); [Reuland, 2001](#)) that local binding between a subject and an object (or other co-argument) requires an anaphor that is morpho-syntactically complex, and anaphors that are monomorphemic ‘simplex expressions/SEs’ have been described as rejecting local binding relations, as exemplified in Dutch (7).

- |     |        |            |             |
|-----|--------|------------|-------------|
| (7) | Winnie | bewonderde | zich*(zelf) |
|     | Winnie | admired    | self self   |
- ‘Winnie admired herself.’ ([Volkova & Reuland, 2014, p. 594](#))

Such typological observations have led on to the development of a highly prominent and influential approach to binding in [Reinhart and Reuland \(1993\)](#) and [Reuland \(2001, 2011, 2017\)](#), which sets out to explain why monomorphemic anaphors are uniformly unable to reflexivize a predicate. In a recent extension of this body of work, [Reuland et al. \(2020\)](#), it is noted that Mandarin Chinese might appear to constitute an exception to the crosslinguistic patterning of SEs, as both the complex anaphor *ta ziji* and the (apparently) simplex anaphor *ziji* allow for local binding:

- |     |                       |            |           |   |
|-----|-----------------------|------------|-----------|---|
| (8) | Zhangsan <sub>k</sub> | changchang | piping    | ziji <sub>k</sub> /ta ziji <sub>k</sub> . |
|     | Zhangsan              | often      | criticize | 3 self                                    |
- ‘Zhangsan criticizes himself.’<sup>3</sup>

[Reuland et al. \(2020, p. 800\)](#) write as follows: ‘If *zi-ji* were truly simplex. . . its behavior would not fit the overall pattern observed, and it would pose a challenge to the approach in [Reuland \(2011\)](#)’. [Reuland et al. \(2020\)](#) then go on to argue that Mandarin *ziji* is actually not monomorphemic and is instead a morphologically complex anaphor, consisting of two morphemes *zi-* and *-ji*, and that this explains its ‘exceptional’ behavior. However, the Vietnamese *mình* cannot be analyzed as bi-morphemic, unlike the Mandarin *ziji*. If *mình* can be used to reflexive-mark a verb, it would therefore pose a clear empirical challenge to theories of reflexivity built on the assumption that local binding is not possible between a monomorphemic anaphor and a co-argument.

With this as background, the primary goal of the current experimental investigation of *mình* is to achieve a better understanding of the cross-speaker patterning of *mình* in configurations of local reflexivity and to probe what regional variation may potentially occur in the use of *mình* as a reflexive object. We conclude that, for many speakers from different regions of Vietnam, *mình* in object position may indeed be interpreted reflexively with the subject of the same clause without the need for *tr*. On the basis of patterns involving ellipsis and quantificational subjects, it is further shown that this is a genuine

binding relation and not simple co-reference. Such conclusions are then noted to have significant consequences for approaches to binding such as that of Reuland (2011).

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2, the core of the paper, describes an experiment carried out with 95 speakers of Vietnamese from different parts of Vietnam, designed to examine the acceptability of local binding with *mình* in combination with different types of predicate, and discusses the results of the experiment, which present a different picture of binding relations in Vietnamese than the patterning described in Đoàn (2022). As the results of the experiment also call into question assumptions held about SEs in Reuland (2001) and other works, Section 3 considers whether and how it might be possible to reinterpret the current experimental data in ways that might avoid the conclusion that *mình* is extensively used as a local anaphor. Section 3 argues against such alternative analyses and for the conclusion that the patterns tested in the experiment display the properties of genuine syntactic binding. Section 4 summarizes the findings of the paper for the study of anaphora in Vietnamese and also for binding theory in general.

## 2. An Experimental Investigation of the Local/Non-Local Interpretation of *Mình*

The focus of the current study is to determine whether speakers from different parts of Vietnam accept co-reference between the subject of a verb and *mình* in object-of-verb position (or as the object of a preposition) without the occurrence of *tự*, resulting in a reflexive interpretation, as schematized in (9):

(9) subject<sub>k</sub> verb *mình*<sub>k</sub>

In designing an experiment to examine the general acceptability of structures such as (9), we factored in considerations of the potential influence of predicate choice on the naturalness of reflexive interpretations. The verbs in Đoàn's unacceptable examples (where *mình* resists local co-reference in the configuration in (9)) all encode *heavily other-directed actions*—the set of verbs listed in (10) and illustrated with (11). The actions represented by such predicates are all perceived as naturally being carried out on other individuals, and are difficult to imagine as being directed toward the initiator of the action, i.e., being reflexive in orientation.

(10) *động viên*–encourage  
*khen*–praise  
*ngưỡng mộ*–admire  
*la mắng*–scold  
*xúc phạm*–offend

(11) Mai<sub>i</sub>            nghĩ            Nam<sub>j</sub>            sẽ            động viên    mình<sub>i</sub>/<sub>\*j</sub>.  
 Mai            think            Nam            FUT            encourage    self  
 'Mai<sub>i</sub> thought Nam<sub>j</sub> would encourage her<sub>i</sub>/\*himself<sub>j</sub>.' (Đoàn, 2022)

With heavily other-directed verbs, hearers may not consider interpretations in which the subject acts on herself, i.e., reflexive interpretations. This might lead hearers to regularly ignore possible construals of *mình* as referring to local subjects in favor of other available interpretations of *mình*. As is well-known (Bui, 2019; Đoàn, 2022; Phan & Chou, 2023), a significant complication in many sentences incorporating *mình* is that *mình* can frequently be interpreted as a first-person or second-person pronoun, referencing either the speaker or the hearer. Hence, in many instances, a [Subject Verb *mình*] configuration will allow for *mình* to be interpreted as either 'me' or 'you', as alternatives to any sentence-internal co-reference with the subject. It may be speculated that with heavily other-directed verbs, hearers might often discard potentially available reflexive interpretations of *mình* due to the easier avail-

ability of construing *mình* as representing the speaker or the hearer, an interpretation more readily in line with the typical use of heavily other-directed verbs. Such a confounding possibility suggests that the patterning of *mình* with *động viên* ‘encourage’, *ngưỡng mộ* ‘admire’, etc., should not immediately be taken to be representative of the general distribution of *mình*, and a broader range of predicates should be examined in any investigation of local binding in Vietnamese. Additionally, Đoàn’s example sentences demonstrating that *mình* cannot be interpreted as co-referential with a local subject are presented in isolation from any embedding context, which may arguably increase the difficulties for hearers to access reflexive interpretations with heavily other-directed verbs. Considerations of this kind lead to two questions, which have guided the current experimental study of *mình*. First, how do heavily other-directed verbs pattern (in the interpretations accepted for *mình*) if a supporting context is added rather than sentences being presented in isolation, without any context? Second, what patterning is observed with *mình* if one considers more neutral verbs rather than just heavily other-directed verbs?

In connection with the above, prior to creating stimuli for the experimental study, the authors hypothesized, on the basis of initial, casual, native-speaker intuitions, that there may be differences among verbs with regard to the availability of local binding with *mình* relating to the typical use of verbs as heavily other-directed vs. not other-directed, as described below.

*Type I.* Verbs which are typically/heavily other-directed. These may be expected to either favor or perhaps require the presence of *tự* for reflexive interpretations in the absence of a supporting context. Henceforth, we refer to this group of verbs as the ‘admire’ class. Examples of this posited group are the following:

- *ngưỡng mộ*–admire
- *ghét*–hate
- *chửi mắng*–scold
- *bảo vệ*–protect

*Type II.* Verbs which are not heavily other-directed/are more neutral. Such predicates might permit reflexive interpretations for certain speakers without the necessary/preferred presence of *tự*. We refer to this group as the ‘blame’ class. Examples posited in this group (as a result of preliminary intuitions gathered from other speakers prior to the experiment) are the following:

- *trách*–blame
- *ngụy trang*–disguise
- *bồi bổ*–nourish
- *thể hiện*–show off

The stimuli created for the experiment made use of predicates from both posited types, in order to be able to report on differences in local binding that might potentially occur as a function of typical verb orientation. The parameters of the experiment are described in Section 2.1.

## 2.1. Experiment Design

### 2.1.1. Participants

One hundred and twelve Vietnamese native speakers were recruited online across three regions in exchange for a \$2.05 gift card to the online store Tiki. Eighteen subjects having accuracy rates below 67% on the unambiguous conditions were excluded, leaving 94 subjects in the main data analysis. The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Southern California, which is fully accredited by the Association for the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs (AAHRPP).

Prior to the main experiment, the participants were asked to complete a questionnaire about their language background. The numbers of participants speaking different regional varieties of Vietnamese are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Number of participants from different regions.

Regional Variety of Vietnamese	Number of Participants
Northern	27
Middle	28
Southern	40

2.1.2. Procedure and Materials

The participants in the experiment were asked to read Vietnamese sentences in which two or more noun phrases were underlined in order to signal that these noun phrases should be construed as referring to the same individual/set of individuals. The participants were instructed to rate how natural the sentences were with the intended co-reference relation, using a 1–7 scale of naturalness, 1 being completely unnatural/unacceptable and 7 being completely natural/acceptable. Examples of items used in the experiment are presented in Table 2. The experiment included sentences containing examples of verbs of Types I and II, as described in Section 2. Eight of the test items made use of regularly other-directed verbs (Type I), with two of these items involving *mình* following a preposition. Twelve test items used verbs encoding actions that are not so regularly other-directed—Type II ‘neutral’ verbs—with two of these examples involving *mình* following a preposition, and two examples having quantificational subject antecedents for *mình*. All of the test items containing Type I and Type II verbs occurred without the use of *tự*.

All the test items occurred in linguistic contexts that would allow for a reflexive interpretation to be available and potentially natural. The set of test items involving Type I and Type II predicates specifically aimed to establish whether *mình* could be interpreted reflexively (referring to its immediately preceding subject) in the absence of *tự*, only assisted by a supportive, plausible context. In addition to the target sentences involving *mình* with Type I and Type II verbs, the experiment also included sentences using the pronoun *nó* ‘it’ in Vietnamese as fillers, with 10 acceptable and 10 unacceptable conditions (i.e., 10 instances in which participants should find co-reference between *nó* and a second, underlined noun phrase acceptable, and 10 examples where such co-reference should not be acceptable). These fillers were used as catch trials to determine whether participants were concentrating on the study or not.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 2.** Test examples containing Type I, II, III verbs.

Condition	Example						
Typically other-directed verbs (Type I)	<b>Other-directed verb (6 items)</b>						
	<u>Hàng</u>	rất	tự tin	vào	nhân sắc	của	bản thân.
	<u>Hang</u>	very	confident	in	appearance	of	own.
	<u>Cô ta</u>	thậm chí còn		ngưỡng mộ		<b><u>mình</u></b> .	
	<u>She</u>	even		admire		<b><u>REFL</u></b> .	
		‘Hang is very confident in her own appearance. She even admires herself.’					
	<b>Other-directed verb followed by a preposition (2 items)</b>						
	<u>Tiên</u>	nói rằng	trong	dịch covid		<u>bà chủ nhà</u>	đã
	<u>Tien</u>	said that	during	covid pandemic		<u>landlord</u>	PST
	<u>hỗ trợ</u>	cho <b><u>mình</u></b>	rất nhiều.				
support	for <b><u>REFL</u></b>	a lot.					
	‘Tien said that during the COVID pandemic, the landlady supported <u>herself</u> a lot.’						



Table 2. Cont.

Condition	Example							
Neutral verbs (not heavily other-directed) (Type II)	<b>Neutral verb (8 items)</b>							
	Khi	cần	đưa ra	quyết định	quan trọng,	Hoàng		luôn
	When	need	give	decision	important,	Hoàng		always
	tin tưởng	<u>mình</u>	thay vì	đi xin	lời khuyên	từ	người khác.	
	trust	<u>REFL</u>	instead of	go ask	advice	from	other people.	
	‘When making important decisions, Hoàng always trusts himself instead of seeking advice from others.’							
	<b>Neutral verb followed by a preposition (2 items)</b>							
	Trong	cuộc bầu cử		mới nhất	, ông	Huy	đã	bình chọn
	In	election		latest	, HON	Huy	PST	vote
	cho	<u>mình</u> .						
for	<u>REFL</u> .							
‘In the latest election, Mr. Huy voted for himself.’								
<b>Neutral verb with quantifiers (2 items)</b>								
Tất cả	các	giáo viên	trong	trường	đều	đang	cố gắng	
All	CL	teacher	in	school	all	PROG	try	
hoàn thiện		<u>mình</u> .						
complete		<u>REFL</u> .						
‘All the teachers in school are trying to complete themselves.’								

### 2.1.3. Data Analysis and Results

Figure 1 presents the results of the participants’ judgements on the acceptability of reflexive interpretations of *mình*—where *mình* in object-of-verb position is construed as co-referential with the subject of its own clause. As seen in Figure 1, there was a very high level of acceptability/naturalness when *mình* occurred as the object of Type II/neutral verbs and was interpreted as referring to its local subject, i.e., a reflexive interpretation. Participants from all three regions of Vietnam judged such examples to be very natural and acceptable, with average scores exceeding 6/7 for all regional participants. This provides clear, strong support for the conclusion that reflexive interpretations of *mình* are both widely available and felt to be natural without the support of *tự*, in contrast to [Đoàn’s \(2022\)](#) findings and generalization that such interpretations are only possible when licensed by the overt presence of *tự*. Considering the participants’ judgements of examples involving Type I typically other-directed verbs, these also showed a high level of acceptability, exceeding 6/7 for speakers from southern Vietnam and close to 6/7 for speakers from central and northern Vietnam. These results confirm that reflexive interpretations of *mình* with a local subject are generally possible in the absence of *tự* even with typically other-oriented verbs once such predicates are embedded in plausible supporting contexts rather than being presented out of the blue as isolated sentences.

Figure 2 shows the acceptability values for the test items in which the subject in [Subject Verb *mình*] examples was a quantifier phrase/QP. Four different quantifiers occurred in subjects in these test items: *tất cả* ‘all’, *mỗi* ‘every’, *ít nhất* ‘at least’, and *hơn mười* ‘more than ten’. As seen in Figure 2, a very high level of acceptability was recorded by speakers from all three regions for sentences in which *mình* occurred in a reflexive interpretation with a quantificational subject in the absence of *tự*, averaging over 6/7 for speakers from all regions.<sup>5</sup>

The experiment also included sentences in which *mình* occurred following a preposition in sequences of [Subject Verb [P *mình*]], rather than as the direct object of the verb. The expectation was that reflexive interpretations of *mình* with the subject in such examples might perhaps be found to have a higher level of acceptability than in configurations where *mình* was the direct object of the verb. The reason for such an expectation was the suggestion in [Đoàn \(2022\)](#) that the embedding of *mình* in PPs permits reflexive interpretations with

a local subject which are not available when *mình* occurs as the direct object of the verb (in the absence of *tự*)—see the discussion in Section 3.2 below. Interestingly, the results of the experiment did not align with this expectation and present a clear difference in acceptability when *mình* occurred in PPs with Type I and Type II verbs. As shown in Figure 3, with Type II verbs, acceptability ratings with *mình* following prepositions were as high as those in examples where *mình* occurred as the direct object of the verb, over 6/7. However, with Type I verbs, there was a significantly lower level of acceptability, ranging from 4–5/7.

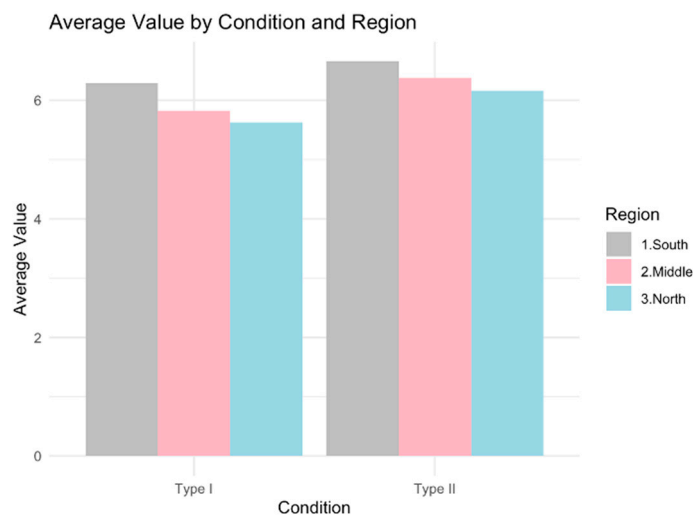


Figure 1. Acceptability of [Subject Verb *mình*] sequences with reflexive interpretations.

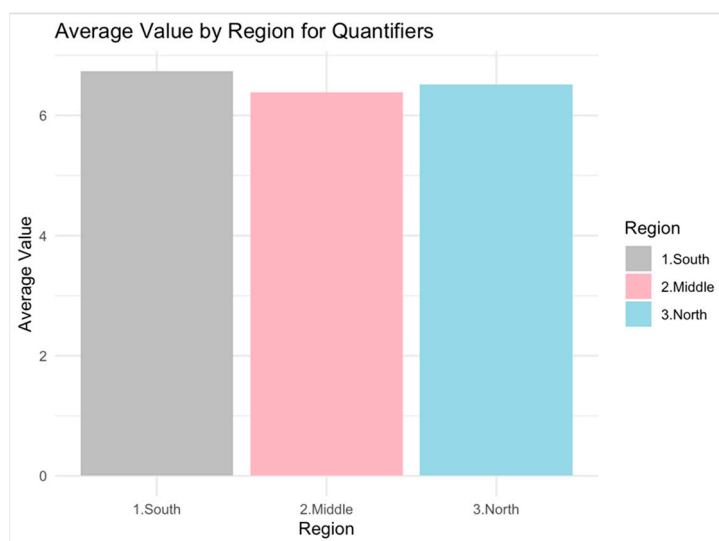


Figure 2. Acceptability of [QP Verb *mình*] sequences with reflexive interpretations.

This reduced acceptability rate relates to specific combinations of verb + preposition. The four pairs of verb + preposition used in examples in the experiment were *biện hộ cho* ‘advocate for’, *bình chọn cho* ‘vote for’, *quan tâm đến* ‘care for’, and *hỗ trợ cho* ‘support’. As shown in Figure 4, acceptability ratings with the former two V + P combinations were as high as in examples where *mình* occurred as the direct object of the verb: over 6/7 for speakers from all regions. However, ratings for examples with *quan tâm đến* ‘care for’ and *hỗ trợ cho* ‘support’ were much lower: 4–5.5/7. This lower acceptability with certain [Subject Verb [P *mình*]] combinations casts doubt on there being a fully general, structural licensing of reflexive interpretations of *mình* when *mình* is ‘protected’ by a PP shell (see Section 3.2 below).<sup>6</sup>



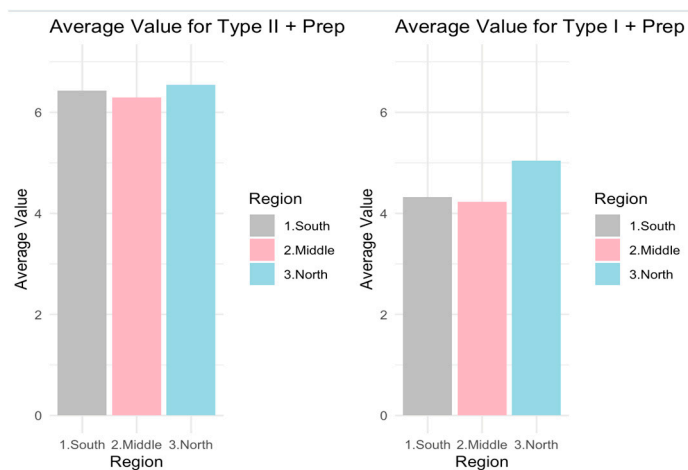


Figure 3. Acceptability of [Subject Verb [P *mình*]] sequences with reflexive interpretations.

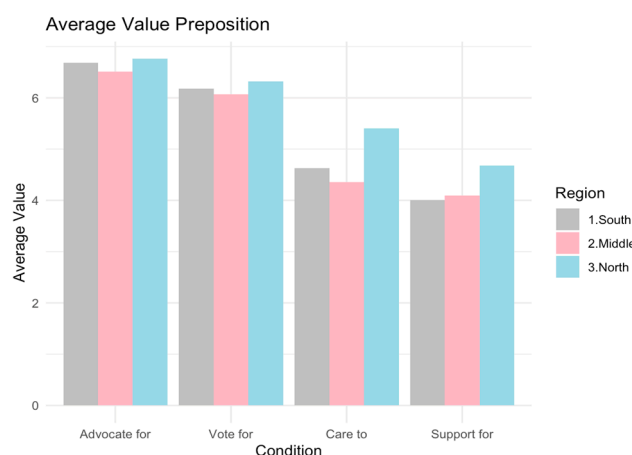


Figure 4. Acceptability of [Subject Verb [P *mình*]] sequences with reflexive interpretations for each [V + P] combination.

While the variable licensing of reflexive interpretations with *mình* in PPs may warrant further useful investigation, in general, the experiment presents strong evidence for the availability of reflexive interpretations with *mình* in (at least) object-of-verb configurations without any necessary presence of *tự* to license such interpretations, when relevant examples are presented in supportive contexts, both with ‘neutral’ Type II verbs and with typically other-directed Type I verbs, for speakers from different regions of Vietnam.<sup>7</sup> Section 3 considers these findings further, in the light of general theories of binding and reflexivity.

### 3. *Mình*—A Monomorphemic Anaphor Allowing Local Binding?

The results of the experiment reported in Section 2 present a clear challenge to claims that *monomorphemic* anaphors cannot be used in local binding relations between a subject and an object, to reflexivize the verb (Reuland, 2011), i.e., the configuration in (12) below. [Subject<sub>k</sub> Verb *mình*<sub>k</sub>] patterns indeed appear to be robustly accepted by many speakers of Vietnamese.

(12) \*Subject<sub>k</sub> Verb Object<sub>k</sub>      Where Object = monomorphemic anaphor

A question that arises now is whether it might be possible to *reinterpret* the results of the experiment in ways that might preserve (12) as a cross-linguistic generalization in order to maintain theories of reflexivity built on (12) as a valid, cross-linguistic description. Here we will consider three potential counter-proposals that might be made in response to the

conclusion that *mình* permits a local binding relation with the subject of its clause. In each case, it will be argued that such potential reinterpretations of the experimental data are not well supported.

### 3.1. Inherent Lexical Reflexives

In English, verbs such as *wash*, *shower*, and *shave* have been classified as inherently reflexive predicates (Reinhart & Reuland, 1993; Reuland, 2001), because such verbs can occur without an object and still be construed as self-directed actions:

(13) John washed/shaved/showered.

However, an overt anaphor can also be added to such verbs, as seen in (14):

(14) John washed/shaved/showered himself.

One conceivable approach to the alternation in (13/14) might be to suggest that the anaphor object in (14) actually does not function to reflexivize the predicate, as *wash/shave/shower* are already lexically listed as having a potentially reflexive meaning.<sup>8</sup> Such a hypothetical approach to *wash/shave/shower*-type verbs in English would raise the question whether a similar analysis and categorization might be made of Vietnamese verbs which allow for local binding with *mình*. If *mình* were to be assumed not to have a reflexivizing function in these cases, similar to *himself* in (14), because the verbs that *mình* is combined with are lexically specified as reflexive predicates, it might be possible to avoid the conclusion that Vietnamese allows local binding with a monomorphemic anaphor.

However, such an approach appears implausible as a potential ‘explanation’ for the apparent well-formedness of sequences corresponding to (13) in Vietnamese, for the simple reason that many of the verbs which allow for (13) in Vietnamese do not exhibit properties typically found with lexically reflexive verbs.

Vietnamese has two clear types of lexical reflexives, as described in Đoàn (2022), and these show different patterns to the use of *mình* described so far and examined in the experiment.

The first set of lexical reflexives is made up of pairings of *tự* and a verbal root, as exemplified in (15).

(15) Type I lexical reflexives: *tự* + verb combinations

<i>tự sát</i>	<i>tự vệ</i>	<i>tự chủ</i>
SELF kill	SELF guard	SELF control
‘commit suicide’	‘protect oneself’	‘control oneself’
<i>tự nói</i>	<i>tự phê</i>	<i>tự cấp</i>
SELF say	SELF critique	SELF provide
‘wonder’	‘criticize oneself’	‘be self-sufficient’

Significantly, lexicalized combinations of this type do not permit the realization of an object—they are lexically detransitivized by the presence of *tự*, hence *mình* cannot be added:

(16)

Nam	<i>tự sát/</i>	<i>tự phê/</i>	<i>tự vệ</i>	(*/?/? <i>mình</i> ).
Nam	self-kill/	self-criticize/	self-protect	self
	‘Nam killed himself/criticized himself/protected himself.’			

This property distinguishes such compound reflexives from regular verbs such as *trách* ‘blame’, *bồi bổ* ‘nourish’, *thể hiện* ‘show off’, which, for many speakers, allow for local binding and interpretations of reflexivity with *mình* in object-of-verb position, either with or without *tự*:

- (17) Nam (tự) trách mình.  
 Nam tự blame self  
 ‘Nam blamed himself.’

The set of lexical reflexives of the *tự sát* type is, furthermore, very restricted and has a small membership, whereas verbs which allow local binding with *mình* in object position are not obviously restricted in number. The latter consequently do not show the typical characteristics of lexical reflexives across languages, which are often found to be restricted to a small number of verbs that describe self-directed actions.

A second type of lexical reflexive described in [Đoàn \(2022:109 fn8\)](#) consists in simple combinations of a verb and *mình*, as illustrated in (18):

- (18) Type II: verb + *mình* combinations
- |                  |                 |                  |
|------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| <i>giật mình</i> | <i>cúi mình</i> | <i>thẹn mình</i> |
| jerk body        | bend body       | shy body         |
| ‘be startled’    | ‘bow’           | ‘be ashamed’     |

These lexically reflexive predicates are again different from the patterns with *trách* ‘blame’, etc., as they do not permit objects which are not *mình*, and hence they must be reflexive—they are lexically listed as reflexive-only predicates:

- (19) \*Nam thẹn/ giật/ cúi Nga.  
 Nam shame/ shake/ bend Nga  
 Intended: ‘Nam shamed/shook/bent Nga.’

This patterning is quite unlike *trách* ‘blame’ and other verbs investigated in the current study, which readily permit objects that do not result in reflexive interpretations:

- (20) a Nam trách Nga      b Nam ghét Nga.  
 Nam blame Nga      Nam hate Nga  
 ‘Nam blames Nga.’      ‘Nam hates Nga.’

We conclude that verbs such as *trách* ‘blame’, *trừng phạt* ‘punish’, and *ghét* ‘hate’, which, for many speakers, allow for local binding with *mình*, are not inherently reflexive, as they display properties that clearly distinguish them from lexicalized reflexives. A reviewer of this paper also helpfully notes that subject-experiencer verbs have thus far never been found to allow lexical reflexivization ([Reinhart & Siloni, 2005](#)), providing a further reason to reject a lexical reflexive analysis of verbs such as *ghét* ‘hate’ when they occur in local binding configurations.

### 3.2. *Mình* Is Covertly Complex and Not Monomorphemic

A second potential way to avoid the conclusion that *mình* is a monomorphemic anaphor allowing local binding might be to suggest that *mình* is part of a more complex nominal expression and hence not monomorphemic, despite appearances. It has been proposed that additional structural complexity allows monomorphemic anaphors to be legitimately used in reflexive configurations (the idea of ‘protection’ to avoid a constraint referred to in [Reuland \(2011, 2017\)](#) as the ‘Inability to Distinguish Indistinguishables’). In Vietnamese, [Đoàn \(2022\)](#) suggests that the embedding of *mình* within a PP provides a structural way for *mình* to be able to refer reflexively to a local subject in the absence of *tự*: ‘when *mình* is in a locative PP, it can be bound without the element *tự*’ ([Đoàn, 2022, p. 71](#)). This is illustrated in (21):

- (21) Nam<sub>i</sub>      đặt      quyển      sách      phía sau      mình<sub>i</sub>.  
 Nam      put      CL      book      behind      self.  
 ‘Nam put the book behind him(self).’ ([Đoàn, 2022, p. 71](#))

It might therefore, perhaps, be speculated that, for speakers who regularly accept local binding with *mình* (without *tự*), *mình* is actually part of a more complex nominal structure enabling its apparent reflexive use. Given the commonly assumed origin of *mình* from the noun ‘body’, a prime candidate for such an analysis could be the possibility that *mình* occurs as the head of a DP which also projects a *pro* possessor, as schematized in (22):

(22) [DP *pro* [NP *mình* ]]

The interpretation of (23) below, for speakers who accept local binding, might therefore be licensed by such a complex protective structure and be loosely translated as ‘Nam criticized his self/body.’

(23) Nam<sub>k</sub> trách [DP *pro*<sub>k</sub> [NP *mình*]].  
 Nam blame PRN body  
 ‘Nam blames himself.’

However, if *mình* were to project a larger, covert structure with a *pro* possessor, it might naturally be expected that this null element could be overtly lexicalized, but this is not possible, as shown in (22a/b):

(24) a. \*Nam trách [DP *nó* [NP *mình*]].  
       Nam blame 3 body  
       b. \*Nam trách [DP [NP *mình*] (của) *nó*]  
       Nam blame body of 3

There is consequently no evidence that might support the assumption of a covert, complex structure with *mình* in such cases, so we continue to assume that *mình* is indeed a monomorphemic anaphor (as also maintained in (Bui, 2019) and (Đoàn, 2022)).

### 3.3. The Interpretation of *Mình* with Local Subjects Is Co-Reference, Not Binding

A final way to deflect the current conclusion that *mình* permits local binding, for many speakers, in the absence of *tự*, might be to suggest that the relation of *mình* to its local subject in such cases is actually ‘co-reference’ rather than ‘binding’. In previous work on binding relations, it has been noted that the interpretation of objects as referring to the same individual/entity as a local subject (or some other sentence-internal c-commanding element) should sometimes be attributed to contextually licensed ‘co-reference’ rather than syntactically mediated binding, as in (112), where Principle C appears to be violated:

(25) Nobody likes John. Even John doesn’t like John.

In order to rule out the possibility that two sentence-internal elements are interpretationally related to each other via simple discourse-dependent co-reference rather than binding, two kinds of test have been proposed to identify true instances of binding, involving the use of quantificational antecedents and the potential availability of sloppy interpretations in ellipsis(-type) structures.

If a quantifier phrase may legitimately occur as the antecedent for a pronoun/anaphor, as illustrated in (26), this is taken to signal that the relation between pronoun/anaphor and antecedent is one of genuine binding (Reinhart, 1983):

(26) a. Every soldier<sub>k</sub> abandoned his<sub>k</sub> position.  
       b. Nobody<sub>k</sub> gave away his<sub>k</sub> secret.  
       c. At least three students<sub>k</sub> will submit their<sub>k</sub> assignment late.

Where sloppy interpretations of pronouns/anaphors may arise in the interpretation of ellipsis patterns, this is similarly assumed to require and indicate a true variable-binding relation, as, for example, in (27) (Sag, 1976; Williams, 1977 among others):

(27) John likes his teacher. Bill does too.

In assessing the results of the present experimental investigation of *mình*, it is important to check and confirm that the construal of *mình* with a local subject is due to binding rather than discourse-mediated co-reference. In order to do this, we consequently need to examine whether *mình* accepts quantificational antecedents in local configurations, and whether interpretations of sloppy identity are locally possible with *mình*.

The first question is therefore whether *mình* in object-of-verb position can be interpreted as referring to a quantificational subject (without the presence of *tự*). The answer to this question is a clear ‘yes’. It is both possible and natural for *mình* to refer to a local QP subject, as illustrated in (28) and (29), which were part of the experimental data and well accepted by participants in the experiment, as already reported in Section 2.

- (28) Cuộc thi sắc đẹp diễn ra rất căng thẳng.  
 NZL contest beauty occur very competitive  
 ‘The beauty contest is very competitive.’  
 Mỗi ứng viên đều cố gắng thể hiện mình  
 Every candidate all try show off REFL  
 trước ban giám khảo  
 in front of judge  
 ‘Every candidate is trying to show themselves off in front of the judges.’
- (29) Chủ nhật tuần rồi đội tuyển quốc gia đã thua trận bóng.  
 Sunday last week team national PST lose game  
 ‘Last Sunday, the national team lost the game.’  
 Mỗi cầu thủ đều trách mình vì đã bỏ lỡ  
 Every player all blame self because PST miss  
 cơ hội vào vòng bán kết.  
 opportunity enter semi-final  
 ‘Every player blamed himself because they missed the opportunity to be in the semi-final game.’

The second issue is whether *mình* (without *tự*) permits interpretations of sloppy reference in ellipsis-type constructions. Here we considered the interpretation of [Subject cũng vậy] ‘subject also thus’ structures, in which content from a preceding clause/sentence is associated with a different subject in a following *cũng vậy* clause, in a way similar to VP-ellipsis constructions in English. The critical question is whether an instance of *mình* in the antecedent clause can be interpreted as referring to the subject of the *cũng vậy* clause (via variable binding)—a sloppy interpretation.<sup>9</sup> Such construals are indeed judged to be very natural and straightforward, as shown in (30–31).

- (30) Năm học này, toàn bộ học sinh đã rớt môn.  
 Year study all student PST fail exam  
 ‘This year, the students all failed their exams.’  
 Thầy Nam trách mình, và cô Nga cũng vậy.  
 Teacher Nam blame self, and teacher Nga also thus  
 ‘Teacher Nam blames himself and Teacher Nga does too.’  
*Sloppy interpretation:* Teacher Nga blames herself.’

- (31) Trong buổi bầu cử trưởng thôn, Nam đã bầu chọn cho mình  
 In election village chief, Nam PST vote for self  
 và Tam cũng vậy.  
 and Tam also thus  
 ‘In the elections for village headman, Nam voted for himself and Tam also did.’  
*Sloppy interpretation: Tam voted for himself.*

A consideration of quantificational antecedents and the availability of sloppy identity therefore both unequivocally support the conclusion that the construal of *mình* with a local subject is/can be genuine binding and cannot be dismissed as ‘simple co-reference’. The element *mình* in Vietnamese consequently represents a genuine counter-example to assumptions underpinning certain prominent approaches to binding—*mình* is an anaphor which, for many speakers, permits local binding with the subject of its clause, despite its monomorphemic nature.

#### 4. Summary and General Conclusions

The primary goal of the present investigation has been to examine and clarify the status of certain basic binding patterns in Vietnamese involving the anaphor *mình*. While the important study of anaphoric relations made by [Đoàn \(2022\)](#) reports that *mình* may only refer to the subject of its containing clause if paired with the element *tự* (32), the current paper has endeavored to probe whether such an intuition is fully shared by other speakers, or whether *mình* may perhaps allow for local binding in the configuration in (33), without the support of *tự*:

- (32) subject<sub>k</sub> \*(*tự*) verb *mình*<sub>k</sub> ([Đoàn, 2022](#))  
 (33) subject<sub>k</sub> verb *mình*<sub>k</sub>

We also aimed to examine whether there might be any consistent regional differences in speakers’ acceptance of *mình* in local binding relations without *tự*. Our experiment consequently involved 94 participants from north, central, and south Vietnam and tested speakers’ reactions to *mình* presented in structures corresponding to (32) with a variety of predicate types. We would like to stress that the current study involved a different approach to [Đoàn \(2022\)](#), testing the acceptability/naturalness of examples in supportive contexts rather than as isolated sentences. Consequently, the present study is not directly comparable to the judgements recorded by [Đoàn \(2022\)](#), though it can be assessed relative to the generalizations about possible/impossible anaphoric structures in Vietnamese which [Đoàn](#) draws from her findings. The results of the experiment show that binding between *mình* and its local subject (without *tự*) appears, in fact, to be widely accepted by speakers from all areas of Vietnam when presented in a natural, supporting context. Participants in the experiment from all regions also regularly accepted the variable construal of *mình* with a local quantificational phrase subject, confirming that the relation between *mình* and its local subject is binding rather than simple accidental co-reference. Such a conclusion is further supported by the occurrence of sloppy identity readings involving *mình* in *cũng vậy* constructions.

Taken together, the results of the experiment provide strong support for the position that *mình* can indeed engage in a binding relation with a local subject in the absence of *tự* for many speakers of Vietnamese. Such a conclusion will, we believe, be useful for future studies of anaphoric relations in Vietnamese and the use of binding patterns to investigate other aspects of Vietnamese syntactic structures. As noted earlier in the Introduction, it also has potentially broader importance for the cross-linguistic typology of binding by means of anaphors that are simplex expressions/SEs. In a series of works by [Reinhart and Reuland \(1993\)](#), [Reuland \(2001\)](#), and [Reuland et al. \(2020\)](#), the assumption is made that



SEs/monomorphemic anaphors are either heavily restricted to a set of self-directed actions (*washing oneself, shaving oneself*, etc.) or require the support of some other element (such as *tự*) in order to reflexivize a predicate. This does not seem to be the case in Vietnamese, where there are no obvious restrictions on verbs that can be interpreted reflexively with the use of *minh*, including verbs that are typically other-directed. Vietnamese therefore presents an interesting empirical challenge to theories of binding that assume that local binding via SEs should not be found in any language—such patterns were robustly attested in the current experimental investigation of *minh*. How such ‘exceptionality’ in Vietnamese may be accommodated with the patterning of SEs reported for other languages, and whether Vietnamese is truly exceptional among languages with monomorphemic anaphors, we must leave for future work.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, A.S. and L.P.; methodology, A.S. and L.P.; software, L.P.; validation, A.S. and L.P.; formal analysis, L.P.; investigation, A.S. and L.P.; resources, A.S. and L.P.; writing—original draft preparation, A.S.; writing—review and editing, A.S. and L.P.; visualization, L.P.; supervision, A.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Southern California (approval code UP-23-00492, approved on 22 June 2023).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available upon request from the second author.

**Acknowledgments:** We extend our sincere gratitude to Lecturer Thu Bui from FPT University and Dr. Van Le from Van Hien University for their assistance in data collection. Additionally, we appreciate the valuable feedback provided by participants at the 4th Annual International Symposium on Vietnamese Linguistics.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Long-distance construals of *minh* are suggested by Phan and Chou (2023) to be licensed via logophoricity. The investigation of such long-distance interpretations is beyond the scope of the current paper. Interested readers may consult Phan and Chou (2023) for useful discussion of these patterns.
- <sup>2</sup> The paper makes use of the following abbreviations: CL = classifier, FUT = future, HON = honorific, NEG = negation, NZL = nominalizer, PRN = pronoun, PST = past, REFL = reflexive.
- <sup>3</sup> Example from Xiu-zhi Wu, p.c.
- <sup>4</sup> With regard to the use of short supportive contexts in the experiment, a reviewer of this paper comments that embedding target sentences within an explicit context may introduce variables that are hard to control for and might unnaturally elevate acceptance ratings. Different perspectives on this issue may be held by different researchers. Our own position here is the following. When example sentences are presented to informants with no supplied context (i.e., out of the blue), it is likely that informants will in many instances supply their own contexts to test out the acceptability of the sentences, and not all informants will necessarily try out the same set of contexts. We therefore believe that offering some kind of potentially facilitative context actually provides a higher degree of control than presenting sentences out of the blue and relying on speakers themselves to uniformly check for contexts which may make a patterning acceptable and natural. Having said this, we accept that it is quite possible that a higher rate of acceptability might result when an appropriate context is supplied than when example sentences are judged fully in isolation, although we do not expect such a higher rate to be artificial and misrepresentative of speakers’ mental grammars. In other instances of anaphoric licensing, facilitative context does not seem to lead speakers to accept ill-formed patterns. For example, in (i), a context highly supporting co-reference between ‘Bill’ and ‘himself’ does not license such a relation:  
(i) ‘When Bill<sub>k</sub> was ill, John<sub>m</sub> kindly looked after himself<sub>\*k/m</sub> every day with much care.’

- 5 A reviewer asks about the quantificational subjects used in the experiment and whether there might be any effect of distributivity distinguishing their patterning. As noted in the text, four different quantifiers were used with subjects in the experiment: *tất cả* ‘all’, *mỗi* ‘every’, *ít nhất* ‘at least’, and *hơn mười* ‘more than ten’. The acceptability rates for all of these quantifiers were (very) high, and there were no obvious effects of (non-)distributivity.
- 6 We are currently not sure what might cause the difference in acceptability among the four types of V + P combinations. The variation found here suggests the need for a focused study with a more extensive range of V + P pairs to identify the factors potentially responsible for such patterns.
- 7 A reviewer of this paper notes that while the use of classifications such as ‘other-directed’ and ‘self-directed’ are common in much work on verb semantics, there are no independent criteria for evaluating which category a verb might belong to. This is certainly correct. However, the ‘other-directed’ vs. ‘neutral orientation’ categorization which partially framed the current experiment turned out not to be significant in the results that were actually obtained—there was a high degree of acceptance for examples instantiating both ‘types’ of verb. The same reviewer adds that differences in thematic roles (agent-theme vs. subject-experiencer) might be useful to test the patterning of subclasses of verbs in Vietnamese with regards to reflexivity. We believe that it would be welcome for follow-up experiments to focus specifically on the testing of agent-theme vs. subject-experiencer verbs. In the current experiment, which included verbs of both types, no indications of differences in patterning were observed. Nevertheless, it would be worthwhile for future work to investigate this possibility further.
- 8 It should be noted that Reinhart and Reuland (1993) and Reuland (2001) actually do not assume such an analysis. Instead, they suggest that elements such as ‘himself’ in (13) are combined with ‘wash/shower/shave’ as regular transitive verbs (not inherently reflexive) and that ‘himself’ does reflexive-mark these verbs when it appears with them.
- 9 The sloppy interpretation of anaphors in contexts of ellipsis has been documented in many works since Sag (1976); Williams (1977). In (i) below, Ke and Pires (2022) note that only a sloppy interpretation is possible when an anaphor occurs in the antecedent clause of a VP-ellipsis structure:
- (i) ‘John<sub>j</sub> defended himself<sub>j</sub> and Bill<sub>k</sub> did [<sub>elided VP</sub> defend himself<sub>j/\*k</sub>] too.’ (Ke & Pires, 2022, p. 278)

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