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## Ellipsis: licensing, structure and identity

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**Abstract:** Following an introduction to ellipsis and its consequences both for communication and for the theory of grammar, this paper addresses a number of issues which have been debated in the linguistic literature on ellipsis, namely structure, identity and licensing. This study brings to the readers' attention the effects which such conditions have for the study of ellipsis in different languages as well as their constraints within the generative framework. As case studies on the conditions and the characterisation of the linguistic strategy under scrutiny, this paper also summarises the main approaches to ellipsis in the studies embodied in this special issue.

**Keywords:** ellipsis, antecedent, identity, licensing, mismatch

## 1 Introduction

In a communication exchange speakers may omit information when the latter can be inferred from the linguistic or extralinguistic context. Therefore, addressees will need to decipher not only what has been said but also what has not in order to reach a full and correct interpretation. This syntactic strategy is known as 'ellipsis' in the linguistic literature and it refers to cases in which expected, that is, subcategorised (or syntactically relevant) syntactic elements, have been left unpronounced. Elliptical constructions thus illustrate a mismatch between meaning (the intended message) and sound (what is actually uttered). For example, in (1), although part of the sentence has undergone ellipsis, its meaning can still be understood and retrieved from the surrounding linguistic context:

- (1) Michael keeps on telling me I won't pass the exam, but I believe I will ~~pass the exam~~.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Strikethrough words represent elided material in this paper, but they are not intended to represent a syntactic or semantic analysis of ellipsis.

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Example (1) is an instance of so-called ‘VP Ellipsis’, in which the elided verb phrase or VP (*pass the exam*) in the second conjunct can be retrieved from the first one, which serves as the antecedent.

Whereas ellipsis has traditionally been approached in the domains of rhetoric, diction or discourse, its formal characteristics were studied in a rigorous systematic way with the success of Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG) in the 1960s. Since the dawn of TGG, ellipsis has centred the attention of many linguists aiming at explaining the mismatch between meaning and sound in natural language communication. The literature on ellipsis within this framework has mainly focused on describing the characteristics of the existing elliptical phenomena across languages, and English is still by far the most studied language, as well as on trying to decipher what kind of relationship is established between an ellipsis site and its antecedent, usually believed to be governed by some kind of parallelism. As highlighted by Merchant (2013a: 1), “it is no exaggeration to say that debates over the nature of this parallelism have formed the core of most of the generative work on ellipsis over the last forty years”. The importance of these debates, as Merchant (2013a: 1) argues, has to do with the fact that they are used in order to prove the preference for a particular kind of linguistic representation over another:

Most of the debate is located in the arena of semantics and abstract syntactic structures – it is clear that surface syntactic or phonological parallelism is not at stake – and as such, elliptical structures often play an important role in fundamental ontological debates in linguistics. The logic is clear: if the parallelism or identity conditions found in ellipsis resolution require reference to certain kinds of objects, then our theories of linguistic competence must countenance objects of that kind.

Transformational Generative grammarians have been mainly concerned with trying to answer the following three questions (see Aelbrecht 2009, 2010; Bîlbîie 2011; Gallego 2011; Merchant 2013a): the structure question, the identity question and the licensing question.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, we will briefly describe the implications of the answers given to each of these questions. To begin with, the structure question can be summarised as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> No justice can be done here to the large amount of literature on ellipsis within this framework. Therefore, as examples of seminal overviews on this topic, we refer the reader to Johnson (2001), Dalrymple (2005), Winkler (2005), the introduction to Johnson (2008), Aelbrecht (2009, 2010), van Craenenbroeck (2010), Bîlbîie (2011), Gallego (2011), van Craenenbroeck and Merchant (2013) and Merchant (2013a).

- (i) In elliptical constructions, is there syntactic structure that is unpronounced? or ‘Is there syntax internal to the ellipsis site?’ (Merchant 2013a: 4). The two possible answers to this question have crucial consequences for the theory of grammar. If the answer is affirmative, the theories of grammars must allow the existence of “unpronounced phrases and heads” (Merchant 2013a: 4). If, by contrast, the answer is negative, one would be postulating that syntax would be ‘wysiwyg’ or ‘wyhiwyg’ (‘what you see/hear is what you get’) (Aelbrecht 2010: 3; Merchant 2013a: 4), that is, there is no need to postulate the existence of more syntax than what is present.
- (ii) The identity question tries to decipher ‘What is the relationship between the understood material and its antecedent?’ (Merchant 2013a: 4). The identity question has centred most of the debates since the dawn of TGG given that identity issues are at stake in one of the restrictions on the occurrence of ellipsis, namely the recoverability condition, which posits that elided elements need to be recoverable from the (either linguistic or extralinguistic) context in order for them to be omitted (Aelbrecht 2009, 2010; van Craenenbroeck and Merchant 2013). Several identity relationships have been put forward in the literature, since the ellipsis site must be identical to some antecedent phrase. However, this identity has been argued to be semantic (Dalrymple et al. 1991; Hardt 1993; Ginzburg and Sag 2000; Merchant 2001; Merchant 2004; Culicover and Jackendoff 2005; van Craenenbroeck 2010; Aelbrecht 2009, 2010; Thoms 2010, 2013), syntactic (Sag 1976; Williams 1977; Fiengo and May 1994; Chung et al. 1995) or both (Chung 2006, 2013; van Craenenbroeck 2010; Merchant 2013b).
- (iii) The purpose of the so-called licensing question is to answer: ‘What heads or positions or structures allow for ellipsis, and what are the locality conditions on the relation between these structures and ellipsis?’ (Merchant 2013a: 5). The licensing question has been addressed by Zagana (1982), Lobeck (1995), Johnson (2001), Merchant (2001), Aelbrecht (2009, 2010), van Craenenbroeck (2010), Thoms (2011) and Johnson (2013), among others. The key issue in this question is to try to discover what makes an elliptical construction felicitous in a given syntactic context and what elements, also known as ‘licensors’ of ellipsis, allow or ‘license’ it in a certain construction. Van Craenenbroeck and Merchant (2013: 702) illustrate this requirement with the following example:

- (2) \*John read the long book and I read the short [NP *e*].<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *e* stands for ‘ellipsis site’ in, for example, van Craenenbroeck and Merchant (2013).

Example (2) constitutes a case of ungrammatical NP ellipsis since this type of ellipsis is not licensed in this context even though it would be perfectly recoverable from its antecedent (that is, it is given information in the context).

An interesting fact about licensing in ellipsis sentences is that not all types of elliptical phenomena take place in all languages (Aelbrecht 2010), which poses a major challenge for the type of crosslinguistic generalisations and hypotheses required by frameworks such as TGG. To give an example, Sluicing is said to be more frequent crosslinguistically than VP Ellipsis, and, as pointed out by Aelbrecht (2010: 14), the example of VP Ellipsis in (3) is allowed (licensed) in English but not in languages such as Dutch, French, Italian (or in Spanish), in (4)–(7):

- (3) Monika has paid already, but Alice hasn't.
- (4) \*Jelle heft al betaald, maar Johan heft nog niet. [Dutch]  
Jelle has already paid but Johan has still not'
- (5) \*Aurémie a déjà payé, mais Jonathan n'a pas encore. [French]  
Aurémie has already paid but Jonathan NE.has not yet
- (6) \*Antonio ha già pagato, ma Stefano non ha ancora. [Italian]  
Antonio has already paid but Stefano not has yet.
- (7) \*Manuel ya ha pagado, pero Ana aún no ha. [Spanish]  
Manuel already has paid, but Ana yet not has.

In addition, it should be noted that not all languages follow the same licensing criteria for the different elliptical phenomena, as they vary greatly from language to language. As an illustration of this, Merchant (2001: 3) contends that “VP-ellipsis as attested in English seems to be quite rare among the world's languages”.

In sum, TGG has mainly concentrated on trying to answer questions on structure (whether there is syntax internal to the ellipsis site), identity (what kind of relationship is established between the ellipsis site and its antecedent) and licensing (what heads, positions or structures permit the occurrence of ellipsis and what the locality conditions established between these structures and ellipsis are).

## 2 A polyhedron gaze on ellipsis

Whereas most of the papers in this special issue address the three questions posed on ellipsis in Section 1, Aelbrecht's study aims at highlighting what ellipsis has to offer to other domains in linguistics. Her paper reveals that

what we know about ellipsis has also proven of high importance in order to support investigations on material which is indeed present. More specifically, Aelbrecht focuses on showing that ellipsis may not only help in the understanding of the architecture of the grammar in general, but may also provide us with insights on the link between syntax and PF. To that end, she tries to link the insights gained on ellipsis with the domain of phase theory by postulating that ellipsis is the flipside of phasal spell-out.

Following, the structure question is addressed by LaCara and Cyrino and Lopes. On the one hand, LaCara's work presents evidence for deletion (that is, syntactic material which is left unpronounced at PF) in cases of *as*-parentheticals by exploring a set of ellipsis diagnostics. Previously, Potts (2002) had shown that even though these constructions appear to contain instances of VP Ellipsis on the surface (e. g. *Sam met Alex, as Parker also will*\_\_\_),<sup>4</sup> they do not. While LaCara agrees with Potts (2002) in that the type of deletion instantiated in cases of *as*-parentheticals does not involve VP Ellipsis, the former convincingly argues that there is indeed evidence for deletion in cases of *as*-parentheticals, contra Potts' (2002) analysis. Instead, LaCara puts forward that *as*-parentheticals illustrate a type of deletion similar to that of comparative deletion as described by Kennedy (2002).

On the other hand, Cyrino and Lopes provide some evidence in favour of the analysis of Anaphoric Null Objects (ANOs) as cases of DP ellipsis in Brazilian Portuguese, distinct from cases of VP Ellipsis. ANOs, which are cases of null objects with a linguistic antecedent, as in *Eu deixei os bolinhos na geladeira porque Maria vai comer \_\_\_ mais tarde* ('I left the cupcakes in the fridge because Maria is going to eat (them) later'), are here claimed to exhibit four characteristics which have been usually associated with VP Ellipsis: availability of strict/sloppy readings, structural parallelism between the antecedent and the ellipsis site, formal licensing by a functional category immediately c-commanding the elided string, and disjunctive E-type readings. It should be highlighted that Cyrino and Lopes do not only propose that ANOs are base-generated empty phrase markers that will be reconstructed at LF, but also contend that both ANOs and VPE in Brazilian Portuguese are licensed by a lexicalized aspectual head due to the loss of generalized verb movement in Brazilian Portuguese. Thus in their paper they address both the structure and the licensing question with respect to these two constructions.

The identity question is addressed by Martín-González with regard to cases of Sluicing. His work focuses on trying to decipher the role of syntax in the computation of the isomorphism conditions that need to be established between

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4 The syntactic gap is represented as '\_\_\_' by LaCara.

antecedents and elliptical clauses. Thus, this paper argues against Chung's (2013) theory, which suggests that the role of syntax concerning the establishment of Sluicing identity conditions is limited. In Martín-González's view, Chung's (2013) Case Condition makes wrong predictions regarding Sluicing data. Instead, he proposes the Condition on Remnants, which claims that remnants must be syntactically integrable in their Id-(entity) sources. These Id-(entity) sources are considered to be the syntactic constructions which serve as the basis to derive the sluiced clauses. This entails that antecedents and/or remnants must possess the required morphosyntactic elements to ensure integration. If these elements were missing, they would convey syntactic unrecoverable information and thus would trigger the ungrammaticality of sentences. Therefore, this approach highlights the importance of syntax in establishing isomorphism conditions between antecedents and sluiced clauses and puts forward that a syntactic condition is indeed necessary in cases of Sluicing.

Finally, the licensing question has also been addressed by the three remaining papers present in this special issue. Firstly, Dagnac addresses the question of what type of elements are conjoined in Gapping constructions. More specifically, drawing on evidence involving the French negative coordinator *ni*, a Negative Polarity Item, in examples of Gapping such as *Paul ne votera pas/jamais pour Tim ni Marie pour Bob* ('Paul will never vote for Tim nor Mary for Bob'), she argues that Gapping does not involve TP-coordination (Hartmann 2000; Kim 2006; Gengel 2009) or a fragment coordinated to the first TP (Culicover and Jackendoff 2005; Abeillé et al. 2011), but vP-coordination, that is, low coordination (Coppock 2001; Johnson 2008).

Secondly, Nicolae tackles the syntactic licensing of verbal ellipsis in Romanian, focusing his work on the restrictions evinced in aspectual verbs. This author offers a plausible analysis and explanation of the double selection frame of inceptive and continuative aspectual verbs in Romanian: while these aspectual verbs do not license complement ellipsis when they select a DP, under a biclausal configuration verbal ellipsis is permitted, on a par with raising verbs selecting subjunctive complements (that is, modal verbs). Nicolae argues convincingly that even though the application of the standard ellipsis diagnostics (Merchant 2001, 2013a) may lead one to claim that aspectual verbs do not license ellipsis in this language, it is in fact the transitive selection frame that blocks an otherwise potentially well-formed example of ellipsis. Thus, it is claimed that those instances of aspectual complement ellipsis that on the surface appear to be cases of Null Complement Anaphora are in fact cases of "undiagnosable ellipsis".

Finally, Ruda's paper, contrasting data from Polish and Hungarian, discusses ellipsis in the nominal domain. It suggests that elliptical NPs can be built around

categorising n heads, which are not merged with roots. The aim of eliminating construction-specific mechanisms from the grammar in the context under investigation leads to a proposal based on NP-internal applications of Agree and, following Roberts' (2010) line of reasoning, on the operation of chain reduction. This paper points to the importance of formal features (FFs) on functional heads (Fs) in the nominal projection, as well as NP-internal phase boundaries, for the cross-linguistic variation in the patterns of NP-internal ellipsis.

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