

ON VP ELLIPSIS WITH MISMATCHED ANTECEDENTS

Entela Bilali

University of Shkodra, Albania

entelabilali@yahoo.com

Abstract

Ellipsis is a highly pervasive phenomenon in language. The term ellipsis has usually been applied to situations in which what is communicated goes beyond what is explicitly stated. As such, it represents a situation where the usual form-meaning correspondence seems to be violated. There has been much debate as to whether the phenomenon should be analyzed syntactically, semantically, or pragmatically.

In particular, the questions the paper raises are: what are the constraints governing the acceptability of verb phrase ellipsis and to what degree is a syntactically matched antecedent required to license ellipsis? Two seem to be the main approaches to this issue: the semantic approach, which argues that ellipsis is licensed by semantic identity between the elided material and its antecedent (Dahl, 1972; Webber, 1979; Lappin, 1984; Gawron & Peters, 1990) and the syntactic approach which posits that ellipsis is licensed by a structural identity condition (Sag, 1976; Williams, 1986; Reinhart, 1991; Fiengo & May, 1994).

However, it has been found that neither of the above-mentioned approaches can fully account for the conflicting patterns of acceptability associated with antecedent mismatch. The question of why in some cases a syntactically matched antecedent is required to license the ellipsis; while in others it is not, remains unresolved. As a middle ground, it has been suggested that acceptability is graded in nature (Kehler, 2000, 2002; Kertz, 2008; Frazier & Clifton, 2006; Arregui, Clifton, Frazier, Moulton, 2006).

The paper makes an overview of the main theories regarding the issue of non/acceptability of ellipses with mismatched antecedents, the type of relation that affects the degree of acceptability in each case, as well as the implications it has for the processing of meaning.

Keywords: ellipsis, antecedent, mismatch, identity

Introduction

Ellipsis is a very common phenomenon in language, especially in colloquial language, among speakers who know each other well, or who being of the same intellectual level take interest in the same occupations. As soon as they find themselves confronted with a well-known situation or are to speak about familiar subjects and in these circles most situations are apt often to return, and most subjects of conversation are familiar they may understand each other with half a word. The context and situation supply the hearer with so many elements which are necessary for the right understanding of an utterance, and so often enable the speaker to leave out what is or sometimes what is thought to be superfluous, as in (1):

- (1) a. John can play the guitar and Mary can too.
b. John can play the guitar and Mary can ~~play the guitar~~ too.

The second clause in (1a) is phonetically presented as *Mary can too*, but it is interpreted as 'Mary can play the guitar too.' In (1b), the verb phrase *play the guitar* appears in both the first and the second clause, but for the sake of economy of communication, such phrases are often omitted creating what is called Verb Phrase Ellipsis (henceforth VP-ellipsis).

The sense of ellipsis implies that words can be ellipped when the words are uniquely recoverable. In other words, there is no doubt as to what words are to be supplied, and it is possible to add the recovered words to the sentence. Given the sentence, for instance,

- (2) She can't sing tonight, so she won't (sing).
(based on Quirk et al., 1972: 536),

it is presupposed that the verb "sing" is ellipped due to the fact that the ellipped item is recoverable from a previous clause in the same sentence. In addition, what is uniquely recoverable depends on the context (Quirk et al., 1985: 861-862). However, Lobeck (1995) points out that not all languages have VP-ellipsis. Moreover, languages that do allow it vary in terms of type of VP-ellipsis.

The current paper aims at a theoretical presentation of a quite common, yet, complicated phenomenon in linguistic settings, namely verb phrase ellipsis. It further tries to shed light on the conditions that license ellipsis as well as on the patterns of acceptability associated with antecedent mismatch.

The concept of ellipsis

Ellipsis has been a target of investigation from the earliest days of transformational generative grammar. The term *ellipsis* comes from Greek via Latin *elleipsis*, from *elleipein* to leave

out, fall short,¹ and is defined in the New Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language as "*the omission of one or more words which the hearer or reader may supply*".²

Therefore, an elliptical structure is one which leaves selected grammatical gaps to be completed from another source. Thus, part of an expression which is current in normal usage or part of a construction which is, in a given milieu, usual, is omitted, because at the moment of speaking (or writing) it may be dispensed with and inevitably and as a matter of course, supplied by the audience or understood by them in the construction of the sentence.³

As Quirk et al (1985: 861-862) point out, "*words are ellipted only if they are uniquely recoverable, i.e there is no doubt about what words are to be supplied, and it is possible to add the recovered words to the sentence. What is uniquely recoverable depends on the context.*"⁴ Thus, neither the speaker nor the hearer have in using or hearing a case of ellipsis consciously to seek for the term or terms omitted, though they may have a more or less faint notion of intending or understanding more than what has been said or heard. The omission is supplied by context and situation.

Quirk has also stated that ellipsis is used to avoid repetition and focus attention on what is new. The question that rises is: when exactly can linguistic expressions count as given in the context? While Merchant (2001:19-25) argues for a semantic condition on ellipsis, the more recent theories (Chung 2006, Merchant 2007, 2008b) argue that syntax is relevant for ellipsis. This article is in line with recent work, and attempts to survey the current state-of-the-art in theoretical debates about ellipsis. It argues that the identity condition required for ellipsis is in part syntactic, and in part semantic.

Indeed, in the linguistic literature there is a longstanding debate on whether ellipsis involves a purely semantic relation between the ellipsis site and antecedent but no syntactic structure in the ellipsis site (Dalrymple, Stuart, Shieber & Pereira 1991; Hardt 1993, 1999; Shieber, Pereira & Dalrymple 1999) or whether syntactic structure is required in the ellipsis site, along with a syntactically (LF-) identical antecedent (Sag 1976, Williams 1977, Fiengo & May 1994). A third possibility is that syntactic structure is required at the ellipsis site, but ellipsis is licensed by semantic identity (Merchant 2001, 2005; Rooth 1992; Romero 1998; Kennedy 2003).

¹ <http://education.yahoo.com/reference/dictionary/entry/ellipsis>

² THE NEW Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language. Chicago, Consolidated Book, 1970. v.1, p.160.

³ Other, and objectionable, definitions were for instance given by J. Marouzeau, *Lexique de la terminologie linguistique* Paris 1933, p. 74; Kühner-Gerth, *Ausf. Grammatik der griechischen Sprache, Satzlehre* 114, Leverkusen (1955), p. 558. A. H. Gardiner, *The theory of speech and language*, Oxford 1932, p. 270 takes the term 'ellipse' in a wide sense so as to embrace all those types of incongruent function where the feeling of an omission is awakened. - According to Ch. Bally, *Linguistique générale et linguistique française* 2, Beme 1944, p. 159 "l'ellipse (est) la sous-entente dans la parole, à une place déterminée du discours, d'une signe figurant dans un contexte précédent ou suivant". See e.g. also E. Weilandt, *Studien zum Bedeutungswandel im Deutschen*, 11, Uppsala 1923.

⁴ Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman. p. 861-862.

VP ellipsis and the identity problem

Ellipsis has been a phenomenon of interest within the linguistics literature for decades, in part because it involves multiple interacting components of the grammar, but also because a core set of basic data has, over the years, proven especially recalcitrant to analysis. VP ellipsis, as in (3), was already discussed by Chomsky (1955).

(3) Mary will solve the problem and John will solve the problem too.

The standard assumption is that VP ellipsis is a PF deletion process that needs to satisfy the ‘Parallelism Requirement’ at LF between the antecedent verb and the elided verb. The constraint on parallelism is required to recover the identity of the elided part, which should receive the same interpretation as its antecedent (Chomsky, 1995; Lasnik, 1995). However, there are instances of VP ellipsis in English where the inflectional morphology of the antecedent verb and the elided verb are not identical.

As Jason Merchant points out: “*in analyzing ellipsis, three questions have occupied much of the literature*”, which are: In elliptical constructions, is there syntactic structure that is unpronounced?; What is the relationship between the understood material in ellipsis and its antecedent? Is it syntactic or semantic?

The traditional syntactic model (Sag 1976, among many others) holds that ellipsis is permitted in contexts where a syntactically matched antecedent is available. That model predicts contrasts like (4)-(6), where an elided VP that is syntactically matched to its antecedent (1) is acceptable, but one which is not matched (5) is unacceptable.

(4) Kim looked into the problem, just like/because Lee did.

(5) # The problem was looked into by Kim, just like/because Lee did. (Frazier & Clifton 2006)

(6) This problem should have been looked into, but obviously nobody did. (Kehler 2000)

The model fails, however, to predict cases like (6), where mismatch is acceptable. Kehler (2000) argued that unacceptable mismatches tend to occur in *Parallel* coherence relations, while acceptable cases typically occur in some other type of relation, e.g. *Result*. Laura Kertz (2010) gives the following example taken from the Wall Street Journal (1989):

(7) In 1973, no Gallo table wines had corks, and in 1980 only 10% did.
(1989 Wall Street Journal)

The meaning of the elided verb phrase is supplied by the antecedent. Despite the ‘missing’ verb phrase in the target, the ellipsis in (7) is understood to have the interpretation in (8), where the target verb phrase is indicated in brackets.

(8) In 1973, no Gallo table wines had corks, and in 1980 only 10% did. [have corks]

Kertz (2010) points out that “*although the bulk of the literature on ellipsis has focused on conjoined ellipses like this one, ellipses can occur in a variety of syntactic configurations and across a broad range of discourse contexts (Williams 1977, Webber 1978, Winkler 2005, among others). Antecedent and target need not, for example, occur in the same sentence.*”⁵ This is demonstrated in (9), where the antecedent clause (containing the verb ‘modify’) occurs in a separate sentence preceding the ellipsis.

(9) “The conventional wisdom used to be that you couldn’t modify the immune response of an infected individual” by inoculating them with synthetic viral proteins, Dr. Redfield said. “We’ve demonstrated that you can.”

(1989 Wall Street Journal)

Antecedent and target may even be uttered by different participants within the discourse, as in (10).

(10) Sen. LIEBERMAN: Do I understand that the Soviets still deny that that was an explosion that—

Dr. ERLICK: Yes, they do.

(1989 Wall Street Journal)

What all of these examples share in common is a dependency between an elided verb phrase and some antecedent clause in the preceding context. The precise nature of this dependency, however, has been much debated.

Within the theoretical literature, two approaches to describing this dependency have been explored in considerable detail. One which sees the dependency between an elided verb phrase and its antecedent as a semantic relationship. According to this approach, ellipsis is argued to be licensed by semantic identity between the elided verb phrase and its antecedent. The other approach holds that ellipsis is licensed by a structural identity condition, usually argued to apply at an abstract level of representation referred to as Logical Form (LF).

However, in some cases it appears that a syntactically matched antecedent is required to license the ellipsis; in others it is not. Evidence that a matched antecedent is required comes from minimal pairs contrasting sentences like (11) and (12).

(11) The driver reported the incident, and the pedestrian did too. [report the incident]

(12) #The incident was reported by the driver, and the pedestrian did too. [report the incident]

In (11), the target clause containing the elided verb phrase ‘report the incident’ is structurally matched to its antecedent, and the ellipsis is well-formed. In (12), by contrast, there is a structural mismatch between antecedent and target—the antecedent is realized in passive voice, while the target is active. The ellipsis in this case is degraded. The reduced acceptability observed for (12) is consistent with the predictions of the syntactic model, which holds that structural identity between antecedent and target is necessary to license ellipsis. In other cases,

⁵ Kertz, Laura. 2010. *Ellipsis reconsidered*. Doctoral Dissertation, UC San Diego.

however, a mismatch between antecedent and target does not seem to affect acceptability to the same degree as in the sentence in (13).

(13) The incident should have been reported by the driver, but he didn't. [report the incident]

Here, a voice mismatch between antecedent and target is again present, but the ellipsis in this case is acceptable, perhaps comparable even to the matched version of the sentence, as shown in (14).

(14) The driver should have reported the incident, but he didn't. [report the incident]

The acceptability of a sentence like (13), despite the syntactic mismatch between antecedent and target, is consistent with the predictions of the semantic approach to ellipsis, which places no special constraints on the syntactic form of the antecedent clause.

Mismatch and syntactic/semantic implications

Sag (1976a) established what would, for many years, be the standard syntactic model of ellipsis, arguing for an identity condition on ellipsis. Building on observations from Halliday and Hasan (1976) and Quirk et al. (1972), Sag argued that while a Surface Structure identity condition was too strict, and a semantic identity condition was too permissive, the LF formulation was just right. Sag demonstrated, for example, that affix identity was not required under ellipsis. In a sentence like (9), Sag showed, the elided VP is uninflected for tense/aspect ('complain' is a bare verb form), while the antecedent verb phrase occurs with present progressive marking.

(17) Peter is complaining about the noise, but John won't. [complain about the noise]
(Sag 1976a no. (1.2.1)(3))

The fact that an ellipsis like (17) is acceptable, despite this mismatch in affix marking indicates that Surface Structure identity is not required. Sag also considered, however, ellipses like (18), which demonstrates a voice mismatch. Voice mismatches in the context of VP ellipsis are grammatical in some circumstances, but not in others (Kehler 2002, Arregui et al. 2006, Kertz 2010, Pietro et al. 2012, a.o.). Sag judged the ellipsis in (18) to be unacceptable, and he attributed the violation to the lack of syntactic identity between antecedent and target.

(18) *Paul denied the charge, but the charge wasn't by his friends. [denied]
(Sag 1976a (1.2.3)(b))

Mismatched ellipses like (18), Sag argued, demonstrate that a semantic relationship between antecedent and target is not sufficient to license ellipsis; structural identity (encoded at the level of LF) is also required. Yet, what precisely determines the degree of acceptability is a matter of ongoing debate.

The above-mentioned, apparently conflicting, data have motivated a third, hybrid approach that incorporates certain conditions on discourse relations. Kehler (1995, 2000, 2002) argues that the contradictory VP---ellipsis data can be explained by an interaction between

ellipsis and the discourse relations that hold between the antecedent and ellipsis clause. Kehler proposes that both syntactic identity and semantic identity guide recovery of an antecedent.

Specifically, he argues that an elided expression that is contained in a sentence that is part of a *cause-effect* relation does not require syntactic representation, but an elided expression that is part of a *resemblance* relation must have syntactic representation. The reasoning underlying this proposal is that *resemblance* relations are, to a large extent, at least, identified on the basis of syntactic structure, while *cause-effect* relations care only about propositional content (see Kehler 2000, pp. 540-543).

Recent findings from acceptability judgment experiments provide some support for the hybrid account. Runner and colleagues have shown that discourse relations influence the acceptability of voice mismatches in ellipsis (Kim & Runner 2010). They found that the mismatch effect was reduced, but not completely eliminated, in sentences that support a cause--effect relation.

CONCLUSIONS

Many types of brevity in speech, especially most cases of ellipsis are not only a welcome and almost indispensable means of omitting from the spoken or written discourse those elements which are for practical purposes superfluous, but also a device to achieve a higher degree of cohesion between the parts of the utterance, to intensify the concentration of the mind, to induce the interlocutors to pay attention to context and situation and to utilize the data furnished by these in constructing their sentences.

The mismatch data present a puzzle in themselves: why would syntactic identity be required to license ellipsis in some contexts but not in others? Neither the syntactic, nor the semantic approach to ellipsis has an answer. Perhaps for this reason, the question has for some time been sidestepped in the literature.

In some cases it seems that syntactic levels of representation contain information that is fine-grained enough to make sense of differences in acceptability judgments for elided VPs with flawed antecedents, in others semantic interpretation seems to suffice. Thus, both, a purely syntactic and a purely semantic account of ellipsis suffer problems and fail to account for all cases of sentences which may be deemed grammatically incorrect, yet sound more natural than their grammatically correct counterparts. Of particular interest are cases of active/passive mismatch and syntactic category mismatch, where native speaker intuitions often collide with observations about naturally occurring data.

Clearly numerous questions remain concerning the licensing conditions of elided verb phrases which do not have matching antecedents. Simply calling such sentences grammatical will not suffice but an account based on acceptable ungrammaticality is promising. Kehler's (2000) observations about the role of coherence relations in ellipsis, together with recent work on the role of parallelism and focus structure (in particular the work of Rooth 1992 and Fox 1999) may ultimately provide a basis for a pragmatic, rather than a syntactic or semantic, explanation of the facts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Aelbrecht, Lobke, and Will Harwood. (2012). “To be or not to be elided”. lingBuzz/001609.
2. Ahn, Byron. (2011). “Explorations of voice, identity and the self”. Presented at Parallel Domains: A workshop in honor of Jean-Roger Vergnaud.
3. Arregui, Ana, Charles Clifton, Lyn Frazier, and Keir Moulton. (2006). Processing elided verb phrases with flawed antecedents: The recycling hypothesis. *Journal of Memory and Language* 55:232–246
4. Chomsky, Noam. (1957). Syntactic structures. Mouton.
5. Clifton, Charles, and Lyn Frazier. (2010). Imperfect ellipsis: Antecedents beyond syntax? *Syntax* 13:279–297.
6. Fox, Danny. (1999). Focus, parallelism and economy. In *Proceedings of SALT 9*. Ithaca, NY: CLC Publications.
7. Hardt, Daniel. (1992). VP ellipsis and semantic identity. In *Proceedings of SALT II*, ed. Chris Barker and David Dowty, 145–161. Columbus: Ohio State University, Working Papers in Linguistics.
8. Huddleston, R. & Pullum G. K. (2002). *The Cambridge Grammar of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
9. Johnson, Kyle. (2001). What VP ellipsis can do, and what it can’t, but not why. In *The handbook of contemporary semantic theory*, ed. Mark Baltin and Chris Collins, 439–479. Blackwell.
10. Kehler, Andrew. (2000). Coherence and the resolution of ellipsis. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 23:533–575.
11. Kehler, Andrew. (2002). *Coherence, reference, and the theory of grammar*. Center for the Study of Language and Information.
12. Keller, F. and A. Sorace. (2005). ‘Gradience in Linguistic Data’. *Lingua* 115, 1397–1524.
13. Kertz, Laura. (2010). *Ellipsis reconsidered*. Doctoral Dissertation, UC San Diego.
14. Lobeck, A. (1995). *Ellipsis: Functional Heads, Licensing and Identification*. New York, Oxford University Press.
15. Merchant, Jason. (2001). *The syntax of silence. Sluicing, islands, and the theory of ellipsis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
16. Merchant, Jason.(2012). Ellipsis. In *Syntax: An international handbook*, ed. Artemis Alexiadou and Tibor Kiss. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2nd edition.
17. Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. and Svartvik, J. (1972). *A grammar of contemporary English*. Harlow: Longman.
18. Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.
19. Sag, I. (1976). Deletion and logical form. Doctoral Dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
20. THE NEW Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language. Chicago, Consolidated Book, 1970. v.1, p.160.