

## Constraints on Clausal Ellipsis are Pragmatic, Not Syntactic

Dennis Ott (University of Ottawa) & Volker Struckmeier (University of Cologne)

Clausal ellipsis reduces a sentence to a single focal constituent, as in short answers:

(1) Q: Who did Mary kiss? A: John. (= She kissed John.)

Merchant (2004) argues convincingly that such fragments are derived from underlying full sentences by means of deletion. In addition, he argues that ellipsis is obligatorily fed by movement of the fragment to the left periphery of its clause prior to deletion:

(2) *movement*: [John [she kissed *t*]] → *deletion*: [John [~~she kissed *t*~~]]

This Move-and-Delete Approach (MDA) is adopted almost universally in current theorizing (Yoshida et al. 2014). Against this prevailing trend, we will examine Merchant's central arguments for the MDA and conclude that they do not hold up: fragments do not need to move.

The first class of arguments given by Merchant concerns categories that cannot be used as fragments, e.g. left-branches such as adjective phrases (3a) and bare transitive verbs (3b).

(3) a. Q: What kind of car does he drive? A: \*RED. (cf. He drives a RED car.)

b. Q: What did she do to the spinach? A: \*WASH. (cf. WASH it.)

Merchant argues that the infelicity of these fragments reflects the fact that left-branches and bare verbs cannot undergo movement to the left periphery:

(4) a. \*RED he drives a *t* car. b. \*WASH she did *t* the spinach.

The second class of arguments is claimed to establish the sensitivity of fragments to *islands* (cf. Griffiths & Lipták 2014). Merchant argues that the infelicity of the fragment in (5a) below follows from its inability to be extracted from the relative clause, as shown in (5b).

(5) a. Q: Does Ben speak the same Balkan language that CHARLIE speaks? A: \*No, ABBY.

b. (No,) \*ABBY Ben speaks the same Balkan language [<sub>island</sub> that *t* speaks].

Pace Merchant, we argue that the constraints relevant to cases like (3) and (5a) are pragmatic, not syntactic: the infelicitous fragments constitute *incongruent answers*. Following Rooth (1992), an answer is congruent to a question if its focus value (the set of its alternatives) matches the denotation of the question (the set of possible answers). In our talk, we will show that this requirement is not met in cases such as (3) and (5), and that this explanation is empirically superior to the MDA, which makes various false predictions. For instance, elements that resist movement (6a) or are not extractable (6b) can nevertheless be used as fragments (cf. Weir 2014).

(6) a. Q: Did he look UP? A: No, DOWN. (\*DOWN he looked *t*.)

b. Q: He read a book by WHICH author? A: SARTRE. (\*SARTRE he read a book by *t*.)

Such cases show that syntactic mobility is not at stake; what matters is pragmatic congruence, met in both (7) and (8). Importantly, even Merchant's original examples establish the superiority of a pragmatic account as opposed to his MDA: the fragments used in (3) and (5) become entirely felicitous when placed in different discourse contexts, a fact not observed previously.

(7) a. Q: Will she wash or iron the spinach? A: WASH, of course.

b. Q: Does Ben speak the same language that his SISTER speaks? A: ABBY (you mean)?

Once the question in (3b) is changed to a yes/no question (7a), the bare verb becomes a congruent answer, hence a felicitous fragment. In (7b), the same fragment as in (5) is used, but instead of *answering* the question, it *reformulates* it, exempting it from question/answer congruence. Importantly, the MDA predicts no difference between (3b)/(7a) and (5a)/(7b).

Based on these cases and others we discuss in our talk, we will conclude that ellipsis requires no special syntax, such as movements not observed in non-elliptical forms. Instead, ellipsis can be viewed as properly contained in the phonological component (cf. Chomsky & Lasnik 1993).

## Constraints on Clausal Ellipsis are Pragmatic, Not Syntactic

### References

- Chomsky, N & Lasnik, H. 1993. The theory of principles and parameters. In J Jacobs *et al.* (eds), *Syntax*, 506–569. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter.
- Griffiths, J & Lipták, A. 2014. Contrast and island sensitivity in clausal ellipsis. *Syntax* 17:189–234.
- Merchant, J. 2004. Fragments and ellipsis. *Linguistics & Philosophy* 27:661–738.
- Rooth, M. 1992. A theory of focus interpretation. *Natural-language Semantics* 1:75–116.
- Weir, A. 2014. Fragments and clausal ellipsis. PhD dissertation, UMass Amherst.
- Yoshida, M, Nakao C & Ortega-Santos I. 2014. The syntax of ellipsis and related phenomena. In A Carnie *et al.* (eds), *The Routledge handbook of syntax*, 192–213. London: Routledge.