

Discourse prominence relations as an explanation for reconstruction under ellipsis

Volker Struckmeier

RUB

Synopsis. From 2001 onwards, the prevailing view of ellipsis in mainstream generative grammar has been the *move & delete approach* (MDA) exemplified in (1):

- (1) (Speaker) A: Would John hire a man?
(Speaker) B: No, [a woman]_i, Foc [~~deletion John would hire t_i~~]

The MDA claims that elliptical fragments must move from a deletion domain, because ellipsis *unselectively* elides that domain.^[1,2] However, the MDA has serious conceptual and empirical shortcomings, particularly as a theory of clausal ellipsis.^[1-6] In this paper, we will offer an explanation for clausal ellipsis that uses discourse factors to predict ellipsis options: Ellipsis fragments, it is shown, can originate from any and all propositions which are prominent enough in a discourse to be *reconstructable*, a term we define below. For this aspect of ellipsis, no syntactic explanations are needed, we argue.

Phenomena and previous approaches. In clausal ellipsis, hearers must often reconstruct materials that are not pronounced. In our examples, we mark *interpreted, but unpronounced* materials by strikethrough. Consider the rejection expressed by C in example (2):

- (2) A: Who did John see at the party?
B: ~~John saw Tom at the party.~~
C: That's not true!

If it was not for the indicated interpretation, B would in fact not even have supplied a proposition that C could regard as *untrue* in the first place.

According to the MDA, materials that figure as elliptical fragments are focussed, since only foci (marked *Foc*) are extracted from the deletion domain in (1). Materials that cannot move fail to serve as fragments, the MDA claims – for example, material from inside the relative clause (RC) island in (3):

- (3) A: Would John hire a man who tries to repair cars with a hammer?
B: *No, [a screw driver]_i, Foc [~~John would hire a man~~ [_{RC} ~~who tries to fix cars with t_i~~]]

Various problems have been pointed out for the MDA.^[4-7] To cite but one example here, German modal particles can surface in fragments, despite being categorically immobile and unfocussed by definition (4):

- (4) A: Wen hat John auf der Party gesehen?
who has John at the party seen
'Who did John see at the party?'
B: ~~Peter hat Tom wohl auf der Party gesehen.~~
'Tom, probably.'
*cf.: *Tom wohl (hat Peter auf der Party gesehen).*

Proposal. We provide evidence that materials are available as ellipsis fragments iff the propositions they are contained in are *reconstructable* – i.e., *discourse-prominent enough* to

serve as coherent at-issue answers, given the previous discourse. We show that the notion of this kind of discourse prominence is largely based on the notion of *question under discussion*^[12, 13]. Continuative relative clauses, e.g., make assertion-level contributions to the discourse (proffer a proposition for inclusion in the common ground), and therefore can be picked up by contrastive fragments (5):

- (5) A: John told the news to Tom in the morning, who promptly passed it on to Mary later.
B: No, ~~Tom passed the news on~~ to Susy.

However, additional factors relating to both semantics and world knowledge seem to enter the equation as well, we show: Restrictive relative clauses' propositions, e.g., also allow for fragment formation under such additional (often, non-discursive) conditions, we show (6).

- (6) A: In the GDR, they had cars made from carbon.
B: No, ~~they had cars made from~~ cardboard.
B':#No, ~~they had~~ cardboard in the GDR.

Furthermore, focus particles can associate with foci inside syntactic islands – and propositions contained inside the islands still reconstruct, contra the MDA (7):

- (7) A: Maria küsst wirklich *nur* Leute, die *niemand*_{Foc} hübsch finden kann.
Maria kisses really only people who nobody pretty find can
'Mary really only kisses people nobody could consider pretty.'
- B: Oder ~~die~~ nur deren eigene Mutter hübsch finden kann.
or only their own mother
'Or people_i who are only considered pretty by their_i own mothers.'
Note unavailable reading: 'Mary only kisses those people's mother(s).'

Our explanation for such data is as follows: In the MDA paradigm examples, relative clauses were used which contained *non-at issue propositions*. Since rejections target at-issue propositions, the failure to provide contrasts to *non-at issue* materials followed. On the other hand, propositions from relative clauses *become* reconstructable in the contexts given, as well as many others we also present in our talk (e.g., when main clauses are tautological, contradictory, or too clearly given to be questioned). Barring new evidence to the contrary, we assume that syntactic factors play no role for the question of ellipsis and reconstructability.

The talk also discusses further issues surrounding ellipsis, which *prima facie* seem to confound the discourse-oriented reconstruction logic advocated for here: E.g., fragment (*sic!*) materials must be licensed by forms uttered verbatim in the discourse^[8]. However, such verbatim materials are quickly forgotten.^[9] Therefore, performance conditions explain the 'locality' of elliptical anaphoricity, we claim. Furthermore, languages can differ with regard to the sentence types that are useable (and used) for making at-issue contributions to a discourse.^[10-11] We claim that these typological differences follow from grammaticization of use patterns, whereby the discourse facts that are responsible for ellipsis, are also responsible for constraining syntactic extraction, potentially explaining the (limited, cf. above) correlations with ellipsis options. Note, however, that these discussions do *not* relate to *ellipsis*, or the reconstruction of elided materials. Ellipsis, and elliptical reconstructions, can still be explained in non-syntactic terms – even if fragment materials certainly cannot.

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