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On ineffable predicates: Bilingual Greek–English code-switching under ellipsis☆

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Abstract

In Greek–English code-switching contexts, Greek verb phrases can antecede apparent verb phrase ellipsis after English auxiliaries, even when a non-elliptical code-switched continuation with a Greek verb would not be well-formed. These facts, together with others from the previous literature, are compatible with a theory of ellipsis that posits an identity relation stated over abstract syntactic structures: mere semantic identity is too generous and fails to block sentences which are judged unacceptable.

The nature of the identity (or antecedence, or parallelism, or recoverability[1]) condition on ellipsis has always been at the center of a great deal of work on ellipsis, as the answer has the potential to inform our theories of syntax and semantics (see van Craenenbroeck and Merchant, 2013 and Merchant, in press for recent overviews of the literature). Several strands of work have identified a number of areas in which it seems reasonable to require that there be some kind of syntactic identity imposed between the antecedent and the elided material: see especially Chung (2013) and Merchant (2013) for discussions from Chamorro and English (and Kehler, 2002 and Lasnik, 2003 for important earlier contributions). In this paper, I build on some new observational data from code-switching in two Greek–English early, balanced bilingual children and show not only that the data are compatible with these syntactic identity accounts and problematic for purely semantic identity accounts that eschew abstract syntactic structures, but also that the data support a view of the syntax–morphology interface that permits feature bundles to be active syntactically without being realizable by the morphological component: there are predicates which are ineffable—they cannot be pronounced.

One source of insight into the identity condition comes the phenomenon of code-switching in bilinguals. Bilingualism is the natural state of most human societies throughout history, from the Rosetta stone to modern urban communities; it is estimated that the majority of humans today are multilingual for some purposes (Grosjean, 1982; Edwards, 2004).

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[1] Although these four terms can be taken as interchangeable here, and probably should be so construed in much of the work on ellipsis of the past 40 years, different strands of work have tended to use one or the other without acknowledging the other terms and without any consideration whether they do in fact cover the same ground. They do not, but for the purposes of this paper, I will be concerned only with identity conditions.

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Multilingual speakers are capable of mixing their languages or code-switching. Code-switching (or code-mixing; see Muysken, 2000), the midstream changing of language code from one to another within a single utterance, is widespread, rule-governed, and an important source of information into the nature of grammatical knowledge (in addition to its well-studied functions as an index of perceived, constructed, and performed social and individual identity and identification). Work on the morphosyntactic properties of code-switching can roughly be categorized into two groups: analyses that posit constraints or rules that are specific to the phenomenon of code-switching itself, and those that claim that there is no such set of rules specific to code-switching per se, but rather that the attested patterns are simply those that emerge from the union of the constraints and patterns that each language's grammar imposes or consists of to begin with (see MacSwan, 2013 for an overview and discussion). In this context, data from ellipsis across languages provides a valuable source of insight for the analyst, since such code-mixed and code-switched ellipses give rise not only to structures that would otherwise be anomalous in the grammar of only one or the other of the codes used, but even to structures that are judged unacceptable in code-mixed variants.

An example of the former kind of structure is furnished by code-switching between Spanish and English: a switch can occur after a light verb *hacer* 'do' in Spanish into English, as observed by Pfaff (1979:301):

(1) ¿Por qué te hicieron *beat up*?
for what you.acc did.3p beat up
'Why did they beat you up?'

A structural equivalent to (1) is not possible in a monolingual utterance of Spanish, however (where *hacer* + infinitive has only a causative reading, not a simple transitive one), as Pfaff (1977:254) points out on the basis of an example much like (2)[2]:

(2) *¿Por qué te hicieron pegar?
for what you.acc did.3p beat.up
('Why did they beat you up?')

The example in (1) also shows that grammatical dependencies, including those typically analyzed as involving movement, can span a code-switch boundary: in (1), the accusative pronoun *te* is the object of *beat up*, but appears proclitically on the finite Spanish verb.

The same pattern can be observed in Greek–English code-switching, where the verb *kano* 'make, do' can be used as an auxiliary to a bare verb form in English, as Seaman (1972:167–168) documents:

(3) óti nomízome pu íne oréo, to kánome *tape*
whatever think.PRES.*1p that is nice it do*.PRES.*1p tape*
'Whatever we think is nice, we tape record it.' (Seaman, 1972:237)

Unlike Spanish, there is no equivalent to these structures in monolingual Greek: *kano* can take only nominal objects in Greek (and Greek lacks infinitives).[3]

It has also long been known that bilinguals can use VP-ellipsis structures in English with an antecedent VP in the other language, as in the following Spanish–English code-switching examples:

(4) A: Estudie ahí! 'Study there!' (Pfaff, 1979:313)
study.imp.2s there
B: No, I can't.

(5) A: Vamos a jugar! 'Let's play!' (Wentz and McClure, 1976:656)
go.1p to play
B: I don't want to.

[2] See MacSwan (2013), van Dulm (2007), and González-Vilbazo and López (2011, 2012) for recent discussion of the syntactic constraints on such switching.

[3] Seaman shows that *kano* also occurs with English nouns, in a pattern reminiscent of the Greek. For examples like (3), it is most likely that *tape* is intended here as a verb, given the meaning; otherwise, it would mean something like 'we turn it into a tape', which the continuation (which Seaman translates as '... and what we don't like, we erase') makes unlikely. This confound is not seen in examples like the following, which is modeled on a sentence recorded in Seaman (1972:238) and judged acceptable by a bilingual speaker today:

(i) *θ*a to kánume *celebrate* tin áli kiriakí.
FUT *it do*.PRES.*1p celebrate the other Sunday* 'We will celebrate it [=Easter] next Sunday.'