

The psycholinguistics of ellipsis

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Abstract

This article reviews studies that have used experimental methods from psycholinguistics to address questions about the representation of sentences involving ellipsis. Accounts of the structure of ellipsis can be classified based on three choice points in a decision tree. First: does the identity constraint between antecedents and ellipsis sites apply to syntactic or semantic representations? Second: does the ellipsis site contain a phonologically null copy of the structure of the antecedent, or does it contain a pronoun or pointer that lacks internal structure? Third: if there is unpronounced structure at the ellipsis site, does that structure participate in all syntactic processes, or does it behave as if it is genuinely absent at some levels of syntactic representation? Experimental studies on ellipsis have begun to address the first two of these questions, but they are unlikely to provide insights on the third question, since the theoretical contrasts do not clearly map onto timing predictions. Some of the findings that are emerging in studies on ellipsis resemble findings from earlier studies on other syntactic dependencies involving *wh*-movement or anaphora. Care should be taken to avoid drawing conclusions from experiments about ellipsis that are known to be unwarranted in experiments about these other dependencies.

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1. Introduction

Ellipsis is a cover-term for a number of linguistic phenomena where a sentence lacks material that would normally be obligatory, and the missing material is nevertheless semantically recoverable from the local syntactic or semantic context. The term ‘ellipsis’ derives from the intuition that the missing material has been elided, i.e., it has been deleted from the surface form of the sentence. Some examples from English include VP-ellipsis (1a), NP-ellipsis (1b), and sluicing (1c), a form of clausal ellipsis.

1. a. Chloe wouldn't like to climb a big rock face, but Zoe would.
- b. Marvin really likes Beth's chocolate chip cookies, but he can't stand Judy's.
- c. Teresa is sure that Bob said something nice on her birthday, but she can't remember what.

Ellipsis phenomena are linguistically interesting because a clear interpretation is conveyed despite the absence of overtly expressed material. This leads to questions about how ellipsis is mentally represented and how the interpretation of the elided material is recovered. The search for answers to these questions is helped by the fact that each type of

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ellipsis is subject to a number of constraints. Recent years have seen a surge of interest in ellipsis phenomena in theoretical linguistics, leading to many new findings about the constraints on individual ellipsis phenomena (for review, see [Merchant, in press](#)). There has at the same time been a steadily growing body of experimental work that has begun to explore similar phenomena, and there has been optimism about the possibility that experimental findings might provide answers to questions that to-date have been addressed only using standard acceptability judgment evidence.

Our goal in this paper is to survey the current state-of-the-art in experimental research on ellipsis, and to articulate what it does and does not contribute to theoretical debates about ellipsis.¹ Also, ellipsis is not the first area where linguists have hoped that experimental findings might arbitrate between competing theories. Similar hopes have been expressed in debates about unbounded dependencies (e.g., *wh*-movement, relativization, scrambling) and anaphora. In some cases, such as the dispute over whether *wh*-movement leaves empty categories or ‘traces’, certain experimental findings were initially regarded as theoretically decisive, and then later seen to be inconclusive. As we shall see, some of the experimental findings on ellipsis may be headed down a similar path. They are being presented as evidence for phonologically null structure, despite the fact that similar arguments about *wh*-movement would not be regarded as decisive evidence for empty categories.

The structure of the article is as follows. Section 2 introduces three key issues on which accounts of the representation of ellipsis differ. Section 3 reviews experimental findings on antecedent-ellipsis mismatches. Section 4 highlights some conclusions from experimental studies on *wh*-dependencies and anaphora that should be taken seriously when interpreting closely related experiments on ellipsis. Section 5 reviews findings on what properties of the antecedent are accessed at the ellipsis site, and how quickly. Section 6 summarizes findings from studies that have used antecedent-size manipulations as a probe for the representation of structure at the ellipsis site. Section 7 concludes.

2. The representation and derivation of ellipsis

2.1. Three theoretical choice points

Many different types of phenomena are handled under the rubric of ellipsis, including VP-ellipsis (2a), NP-ellipsis (2b), sluicing (2c), and comparatives (2d). Ellipsis in all of these cases involves the omission of some material that is required for full interpretation of the sentence. We follow the common practice of indicating the ellipsis site with an underline, but we do so without intending commitments on the mental representation of ellipsis.

2.
 - a. Juanita left the party early, and Marcel did too.
 - b. The judge reviewed the plaintiff’s testimony and then the defendant’s .
 - c. The mayor voted for a presidential candidate, but he didn’t say which one .
 - d. The teacher read more books than the students did .

Ellipsis might appear to be just another piece of linguistic ephemera. However, it has proven to be a model system for studying sound-meaning correspondences. Ellipsis represents a break down in the usual mapping between sound and meaning. As such, analyses of ellipsis have sought to determine how speakers recover an interpretation in the absence of input.

Research in this domain has given rise to several grammatical alternatives, focusing on three aspects of ellipsis resolution. These alternatives can be visualized as a decision tree, as shown in [Fig. 1](#).

2.2. The nature of the antecedent

Ellipsis is anaphoric in nature, as it depends on an antecedent in the context for recovery of meaning. The relationship between the ellipsis and its antecedent is not unconstrained. Rather it is subject to a parallelism requirement, typically stated in terms of a formal identity constraint. This identity constraint may be demonstrated via tests of compatibility with the sentence fragment that introduces the ellipsis. Thus, ellipsis in (3b) is assumed to be parallel at some level to the corresponding nonelliptical sentence in (3a), as indicated by the strikethrough text. Ellipsis is well-formed in (3b) because the antecedent VP *read the book* is syntactically and semantically compatible with the ellipsis clause. In contrast, ellipsis

¹ We are hesitant to use the term ‘theoretical’ here, as it can leave the misleading impression that traditional process-neutral accounts of language structure count as theories, whereas real-time accounts of mental linguistic computation are not; and it invites the even more misleading conclusion that theoretical linguistics is not an empirical pursuit. But we trust that the reader will avoid these assumptions.

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