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Processing Ellipsis

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VP ellipsis and sluicing are forms of ellipsis that can cross a sentence boundary. A series of comprehension studies on these forms of ellipsis will be presented in order to explore the processing of elided structures and to elucidate the relation between syntactic and discourse processing. One set of studies tests the hypothesis that a new utterance is preferentially related to the main assertion of the preceding utterance, which is typically a constituent high in the syntactic tree. The results support the main assertion hypothesis and suggest that discourse processing differs from syntactic processing, where the most accessible material is recent material found low in the syntactic tree. Another set of studies examines the hypothesis that perceivers prefer focused antecedents or antecedents in the position where informational focus is expected to occur.

A syntactic theory of ellipsis will be assumed, where a syntactically parallel antecedent is required in order for the ellipsis to be well-formed. It is well-known that this sort of theory under-generates: many attested examples of ellipsis occur without a syntactically parallel antecedent. Two solutions to the undergeneration problem will be compared. One solution claims that syntactically parallel antecedents are required only for elided sentences occurring in certain discourse coherence relations (Kehler, 2002). An alternative suggests that when perceivers do not have an appropriate syntactic antecedent, they build one at LF using the materials at hand. Recent studies favor the latter (recycling) hypothesis.