On Ellipsis: Generative Approaches to the Interpretation of Missing Constituents

Howard Lasnik
University of Maryland
lasnik@umd.edu

I. Background
Chomsky and Lasnik (1977), Chomsky (1981)

(1)
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{D(Deep)-Structure} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{S(Surface)-Structure} \\
\text{LF}
\end{array}
\]

(Phonetic Form) (Logical Form)

Items from the lexicon are inserted into the D-Structure in accord with their syntactic properties and semantic roles, including thematic (θ) relations (agent of..., patient of..., etc., roughly corresponding in simple cases to subject of..., object of...).

A. Movement

Transformations successively alter the D-Structure (the movement transformations leaving traces, markers indicated the position something moved from) eventually producing an S-Structure. For instance, in a passive sentence such as (2), the thematic object is transformationally displaced to subject position, as in the D-structure and S-structure given in simplified form in (2)a and b respectively. [Sentence = IP, the projection of the verbal inflectional element I which encodes tense and agreement information.]

(2) Mary should be chosen t(race)

(2)a
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{IP} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{NP} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{I'} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{I} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{VP} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{Modal} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{should} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{V} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{VP} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{be} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{V} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{NP} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{chosen Mary}
\end{array}
\]

(2)b
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{IP} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{NP} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{I'} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{Mary} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{I} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{VP} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{modal} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{should} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{V} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{VP} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{be} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{V} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{NP} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{chosen trace}
\end{array}
\]

Transformations continue the derivation from S-structure to LF (in this instance producing no major changes). Phonological rules continue the derivation from S-Structure to PF (with the traces deleted).

The movement transformation just seen moves an NP to subject position. Some other transformations move NPs to a pre-subject position. Topicalization, as in (3), is one such.

(3) Mary, we should choose t

(4) IP
   /    \
   NP   IP
   /    \ Mary
   NP    I'
   we    /   \ I VP
   should /   \ V NP
   choose t

One of the best studied constructions involves fronted interrogative expressions, as in (5). CP is Complementizer Phrase, where Complementizer is a mood and/or force marker. Who moves to 'specifier' of CP (WH-movement) and the modal auxiliary moves to C.

(5) Who should we choose t

(6) CP
   /    \ 
   NP   C'
   /    \ Who
   C    IP
   should /   \ I'
   NP    we    /   \ I VP
   we    /   \ V NP
   choose t

B. Ellipsis

Another major target of syntactic investigation has been sentences with missing constituents. (7) illustrates VP ellipsis and (8) illustrates IP ellipsis (labeled 'Sluicing' by Ross (1969)).

(7) You should choose Mary and we should choose Mary too
(8) We should choose someone, but I don't know who we should choose t

As indicated with the strike-out notation, there is an 'identity' requirement relating the missing constituent and a linguistic antecedent. Thus, (8) cannot mean:

(9) You should choose someone, but I don't know who we will fire

There are a number of interesting questions (several of them hotly debated currently) about the precise nature of the identity requirement. For instance, (8) already suggests that strict formal identity is not required, since the ellipsis site has a trace in the position where the antecedent has the indefinite expression someone. Given that the trace can plausibly be regarded as a sort of indefinite,
a more abstract kind of semantic identity might be at work. On the other hand, there are phenomena indicated that formal identity is required for ellipsis. For example, actives and corresponding passives are very close semantically, but neither qualifies as an antecedent for the other in VP ellipsis or Sluicing:

(10) *John was praised by Mary and Bill should praise John too
(11) *Mary praised John and Harry was praised by Mary too
(12) *Someone shot Ben, but I don't know by whom Ben was shot too

Consider next the phenomenon of 'sloppy identity' identified by Ross (1969). An example like (13) is ambiguous, even when he in the first conjunct is taken as referring to John.

(13) John thinks he is clever and Bill does think he is clever too

On what Ross called the 'strict' reading, the missing he in the second conjunct also refers to John. On the 'sloppy' reading, it refers to Bill. Thus, on this reading John attributes cleverness to himself, and Bill attributes cleverness to himself. On this reading, the pronoun and its missing correlate are behaving like bound variables. What is interesting is that even on the sloppy reading, for most speakers a formal identity effect is clearly discernible. Mismatch of agreement features inhibits the reading:

(14) ??John thinks he is clever and Mary does think she is clever too
(15) *Mary thinks she is clever and Bill does think he is clever too

Given the organization of the grammar schematized in (1), there are two natural approaches to ellipsis. In one, 'PF deletion', the understood material in the ellipsis site is present throughout the syntactic derivation from D-Structure through S-Structure to LF. It is only eliminated by a deletion operation in the PF component. Thus, for all purposes except phonetic ones the elided material is in the structure.

In the alternative theory, 'LF copying', the elided constituent is absent throughout the derivation, being inserted only in the LF component. The two approaches can be summarized as:

(16) PF deletion approach: Elided and corresponding non-elided sentences are identical except at the level of PF.
(17) LF copying approach: Elided and corresponding non-elided sentences are identical only at LF.

Obviously, the two approaches are very close in their effects, seemingly making identical predictions about the 'observable' levels of PF and LF. However, there have been a number of arguments that seem to favor one or the other of the approaches. A critical survey of those arguments will be the major theme of this presentation.

II. A standard argument for LF copying: Missing ambiguities

A. Specific/non-specific ambiguities

(18) Mary wants to catch a fish
(19)a There is a certain fish that Mary want to catch
   b Mary hopes her fishing is successful

(20) (18) is two-ways ambiguous. But (21) is not four-ways ambiguous, only two. The interpretation of the ellipsis target must
parallel that of the antecedent.

(21) Mary wants to catch a fish and John does too

(22) Suppose, as extensively argued by May (1977) among many others, that quantificational ambiguities are resolved by LF configuration. In particular, LF movement operations (movement between S-Structure and LF) create 2 different LF structures for (18), each corresponding to one of the 2 indicated readings. A fish is ultimately realized as a restricted existential quantifier and its trace as a variable bound by the operator. (PRO is the silent subject 'controlled' by the higher subject Mary.)

(23)a [A fish] [Mary wants [PRO to catch t]]
b Mary wants [a fish [ PRO to catch t]]

(24) Then, the reasoning goes, the LF movement operation (Quantifier Raising - QR) takes place in the first clause of (21), and the resulting VP structure is copied into the missing VP position in the second clause.

B. Scope ambiguities with two quantifiers

(25) Some linguist admires every philosopher

(26)a For each philosopher, there is some linguist who admires him or her
b There is a linguist who has universal admiration for philosophers

(27) Unsurprisingly, (28) has the same ambiguity:
(28) Some psychologist admires every philosopher

(29) Here again, combining (25) with an elliptical version of (28) gives a sentence that is not four-ways ambiguous:

(30) Some linguist admires every philosopher and some psychologist does too

(31) Some linguist₁ [every philosopher₂ [t₁ loves t₂]]
(32) Every philosopher₂ [some linguist₁ [t₁ loves t₂]]

(33) The same line of reasoning as in (24) could apply here as well.

C. Questions about the argument

(34) The result crucially depends on a particular ordering of operations: First, movement in the antecedent, then copying the resulting structure. Does this follow from any deeper principle?

(35) The copying process provides a trace (=variable) in the right position. But the moved item (=operator) is generally outside of the ellipsis site. So how does the elliptical clause get an operator?

(36) Perhaps most importantly, the argument relies on the assumption that the parallelism phenomenon is a special property of ellipsis. But as already observed in Lasnik (1972), it arises with or without ellipsis. (See Tancredi (1992) for extensive discussion.)

(37) Mary wants to catch a fish and John wants to catch a fish too
(38)a There is a certain fish that Mary want to catch, and there is a
certain fish that John wants to catch
b Mary hopes her fishing is successful, and John hopes his fishing is successful

(39) Similarly for:

(40) Some linguist admires every philosopher and some psychologist admires every philosopher too

(41) Thus, the parallelism phenomenon doesn't tell us anything about ellipsis per se. In fact, as suggested by Chomsky and Lasnik (1993), it becomes a mild argument against an LF copying approach:

(42) We need some principle, call it PARR, that gives parallel interpretation in the non-elliptical sentences. The null hypothesis would be that the same principle is at work in the elliptical sentences. But then an additional mechanism ensuring parallelism would be redundant.

III. Arguments for PF deletion

A. Sluicing and preposition stranding  
Ross (1969), as developed by Merchant (1999), Merchant (2001)

(43) Some languages (mostly Germanic ones) allow WH-movement of the object of a preposition 'stranding' the preposition.

(44) Who has Peter talked with t

(45) Vem har Peter talat med t  Swedish

(46) Hvem har Peter snakket med t  Danish

(47) Other languages (the large majority) do not allow preposition stranding. (* indicates unacceptability.)

(48) *Pjon milise me Greek
    who she.spoke with

(49) *Kim je govorila Ana sa Serbo-Croatian
    who Aux spoken Ana with

(50) Sluicing mirrors these properties, arguing, as noted by Ross and by Merchant, for an analysis involving movement followed by deletion. (* indicates unacceptability if 'xxx' is absent.)

(51) Peter was talking with someone, but I don't know who

(52) Peter har talat med någon; jag vet inte (med) vem Swedish
    Peter has talked with someone I  know not (with) who

(53) Peter har snakket med en eller anden, men jeg ved Danish
    Peter has talked with one or another but I  know
    ikke (med) hvem
    not (with) whom

(54) I Anna milise me kapjon, alla dhe ksero *(me) pjon Greek
    the Anna spoke with someone but not I.know with who

(55) Ana je govorila sa nekim, ali ne znam *(sa) kim S-C
    Ana Aux spoken with someone but not I.know with who
B. Case matching

Ross (1969), as developed by Merchant (1999), Merchant (2001)

(56) 'Case matching': In overtly Case inflected languages (such as German), the Case of the remnant is just what the Case of the fronted WH expression would have been in the non-elliptical form.

(57) Er will jemanden schmeicheln, aber sie wissen nicht, he wants someone.DAT flatter but they know not *wer / *wen / wem
who.NOM who.ACC who.DAT
'He wants to flatter someone, but they don't know who.'

(58) Sie wissen nicht *wer / *wen / wem er
They know not who.NOM who.ACC who.DAT he
schmeicheln will
flatter wants
'They don't know who he wants to flatter'

(59) Er will jemanden loben, aber sie wissen nicht, he wants someone.DAT praise but they know not *wer / *wen / wem
who.NOM who.ACC who.DAT
'He wants to praise someone, but they don't know who.'

(60) Sie wissen nicht *wer / wen / *wem er
They know not who.NOM who.ACC who.DAT he
schmeicheln will
flatter wants
'They don't know who he wants to flatter'

V. Antecedent contained deletion

(61) There is a major argument by May (1985), developing ideas of Sag (1976), that the identity needed for ellipsis is, in a particular kind of ellipsis construction, necessarily created by an LF operation raising a quantifier to its scope position. Ellipsis, then, couldn't be a PF phenomenon, given the model in (1).

(62) Dulles suspected everyone Angleton did

(63) What is the antecedent of the missing VP?

(64) Dulles [vp suspected [np everyone Angleton did [vp e]]]

[vp suspected [np everyone Angleton did [vp e]]]

(65) The antecedent once again contains the missing VP, leading to an apparent infinite regress. So far, the problem is neutral between a PF deletion account and an LF copying one. In the former case, the antecedent for the deletion could not exist. In the latter, copying in the antecedent creates the same VP that still needs an antecedent.

(66) May argues that if the direct object undergoes QR before LF copying takes place, the regress is avoided. Instead of (64), we have (67):

(67) [np everyone [fp Angleton did [vp e]]]i Dulles [vp suspected Li]

[vp suspected Li]

(68) This is the best argument I know for LF copying, and, in fact,
the best argument I know for QR.

(69) To maintain a PF account, it would presumably be necessary to posit a movement operation between D-Structure and S-Structure that has the effect of removing from inside its antecedent the VP that is to be deleted.

(70) Just that has been suggested by Baltin (1987) (who proposes that the relative clause moves) and Lasnik (1993) and Hornstein (1994) (who explore movement of the entire NP direct object).

References


