Ellipsis and ‘nonsentential speech’

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Abstract
Fragment answers and nonsentential utterances are argued to be syntactically elliptical for fully sentential structures; an ellipsis analysis accounts for a wide range of connectivity and anti-connectivity effects. Fragments furthermore undergo movement to a clause-external position prior to ellipsis, capturing a number of otherwise puzzling asymmetries.

Keywords: ellipsis, fragments, nonsententials, short answers

1. Introduction
The nature of short or ‘fragment’ answers as in (1) and that of ‘out-of-the-blue’ utterances as in (2) have long been of interest to linguists and philosophers.

(1) [Abby and Ben are at a party. Abby asks Ben about who their mutual friend Sarah is bringing as a date by uttering: “Who is Sarah bringing?” Ben answers:] Alex.

(2) [Abby and Ben are at a party. She sees an unfamiliar man with Sarah, a mutual friend of theirs, and turns to Ben with a puzzled look on her face. Ben says:] Some guy she met at the park

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1 This paper is a much abbreviated version of sections 3 and 5 of a longer manuscript, Merchant (2003), where these issues are treated in more detail. My thanks noted there hold here as well, with additional thanks due to the organizers of the 15th International Symposium on Theoretical and Applied Linguistics and to the audience for their comments and reactions.
The final utterances in (1) and (2) are generally known as ‘nonsentential speech’ or ‘fragments’ in the linguistic and philosophical literature. The primary observation to be made about these fragments is that they can have the same conversational function as (3) and (4) respectively:

(3) Sarah is bringing Alex
(4) He’s some guy she met at the park

The question that this observation gives rise to is the following: how can such syntactically nonsentential objects give rise to well-formed assertions with fully sentential propositional content? More specifically, does the propositional content of (1) and (2) come from (i) a novel method of generating and interpreting such fragments, or (ii) the usual mechanisms? The consequences for the architecture of the grammar are clear, depending on which option is correct. If option (i) is right, we need to allow non-propositional semantic objects to be able to be used to make assertions, whereas if option (ii) is right, we need to implement what appears to be a new kind of ellipsis.

Option (i), which I will call the ‘direct interpretation’ approach, has enjoyed considerable success, being pursued in various forms by van Riemsdijk (1978), Yanofsky (1978), Barton (1990), Stainton (1995), (1997), (1998), Ginzburg and Sag (2000), and Jackendoff (2002), among others. Option (ii), which I will call the ‘ellipsis’ approach, and which is the more conservative one in that it does not necessitate a revision of the mechanisms of the form-meaning mappings, has had fewer adherents, the primary ones being Hankamer (1979), Morgan (1973), (1989), and Stanley (2000). In this paper, I present data that supports the ellipsis approach, and argue that this ellipsis is preceded by movement of the fragment to a clause-peripheral position. This analysis is shown to correctly capture the full range of facts in English, Greek, and other languages from case-matching, preposition-stranding, binding theory connectivity, selectional restrictions, vehicle change effects, structure preservation, pronominal restrictions, scope, bound variable anaphora, polarity items, complementizer deletion, island sensitivity, and immobility effects.

2. Fragment answers

Fragment answers can be of a variety of categories, such as DPs, PPs, and VPs, as seen below:

(5) a. Who did she see?
   b. John
(6) a. When did he leave?
b. After the movie ended
(7) a. What does Bush want to do to Iraq?
b. Take it over

In all these cases, I propose that the fragment has undergone movement to a clause-peripheral position, call it specFP, and that the head of this projection, F, hosts a feature E which licenses the ellipsis of the host clause TP out of which the fragment has moved. This is illustrated for (5) in (8) (see Merchant 2001 for details of the E feature).

(8) FP
\[ \text{DP John}_2 \quad F' \]
\[ F_{[E]} \quad <TP> \]
\[ \text{she saw } t_2 \]

2.1 Evidence for ellipsis in fragments

The first kind of evidence for ellipsis in fragments comes from case connectivity effects.

2.1.1 Case-matching connectivity effects

In languages with overt case morphology on DPs, the case of a fragment must match the case of the wh-phrase that is its correlate. This is illustrated for Greek below, but also holds for Russian, German, Urdu, Hebrew, Korean, and English.

(9) Q: Pjor idhe ti Maria?
\[ \text{who.NOM saw the Maria} \]
\[ \text{a. A: O Giannis the Giannis.NOM} \]
\[ \text{b. A: *To Gianni the Giannis.ACC} \]

(10) a. A: O Giannis idhe ti Maria
\[ \text{the Giannis.NOM saw the Maria.ACC} \]
\[ \text{b. A: *To Gianni idhe ti Maria} \]
\[ \text{the Giannis.ACC saw the Maria.ACC} \]

(11) Q: Pjon idhe i Maria?
\[ \text{who.ACC saw the Maria?} \]
\[ \text{a. A: *O Giannis the Giannis.NOM} \]
\[ \text{b. A: To Gianni the Giannis.ACC} \]
(12) a. A: *I Maria idhe o Giannis  (*Maria saw Giannis')
    the Maria.NOM saw the Giannis.NOM

    b. A: I Maria idhe to Gianni  (*Maria saw Giannis')
    the Maria.NOM saw the Giannis.ACC

2.1.2 Other connectivity effects

In general, a fragment shows the same kinds of grammatical dependency effects that we find in fully sentential structures. This is illustrated for the binding principles A, B, and C in English below, and for the more complex anaphoric dependency found with the Greek item o idhios in (16) and (17).

(13) Where is he₂ staying?
    a. *In John₂'s apartment
    b. *He₁ is staying in John₂'s apartment (check the numbering)

(14) Who did John₁ try to shave?
    a. *Him₁
    b. *John₁ tried to shave him₁

(15) Who does John like?
    a. Himself
    b. John likes himself

(16) a. Pjos nomizi o Giannis oti tha pari tin dhoulia?
    who thinks the Giannis that FUT gets the job
    'Who does Giannis think will get the job?'

    b. O idhios
    the same
    'Him' (= Giannis, thinks that he₁ will get the job.)

    c. O Giannis₁ nomizi oti tha pari tin dhoulia o idhios₁
    the Giannis thinks that FUT gets the job the same
    'Giannis₁ thinks that he₁ will get the job'

(17) a. Pjos nomizi oti tha pari tin dhoulia o Giannis?
    who thinks that FUT gets the job the Giannis
    'Who thinks Giannis will get the job?'

    b. *O idhios
    the same

    c. *O idhios₁ nomizi oti tha pari tin dhoulia o Giannis₁
    the same thinks that FUT gets the job the Giannis

Identical remarks hold for scopal interactions and for the possibility for bound pronouns:
(18) A: How many diplomats did every translator greet?  
   B: a. Three  
       b. Every translator greeted three (diplomats)  
(19) A: Who does every Englishman$_1$ admire?  
   B: a. His$_1$ mother  
       b. Every Englishman$_1$ admires his$_1$ mother  

Tellingly, vehicle change effects, which are limited to elliptical contexts, are found in fragment answers as well (compare the vehicle change effect in sluicing in (21)).  

(20) Who did you tell $t$ about Bill$_2$’s raise?  
   a. Him$_2$  
   b. *I told him$_2$ about Bill$_2$’s raise  
(21) The police arrested Alex$_3$, but he$_3$ didn’t know why <the police arrested him$_3$>  

2.2 Evidence for movement in fragments  

There is also substantial evidence that the fragment has moved prior to the ellipsis.  

2.2.1 Preposition stranding  

The first such evidence comes from the cross-linguistic distribution of prepositionless fragment answers to wh-phrases governed by a preposition. While such answers are grammatical in preposition-stranding languages, such as English and the Scandinavian languages, these kinds of answers are impossible in non-preposition-stranding languages like Greek, German, Yiddish, Czech, Russian, Bulgarian, and Hebrew (the Hebrew example from Ginzburg and Sag 2000: 299).  

(22) English  
   a. Who was he talking with?  
   b. Mary  
(23) Swedish  
   a. Vem har Peter talat med?  
   b. Mary  
   who has Peter talked with?  
(24) Norwegian  
   a. Hvem har Per snakket med?  
   b. Mary  
   who has Per talked with?  
(25) Danish  
   a. Hvem har Peter snakket med?  
   b. Mary  
   who has Peter talked with?  
(26) Icelandic  
   a. Hvern hefur Pétur talat við?  
   b. Mary  
   whom has Petur talked with?
(27) Greek a. Me pjon milise i Anna? b. Me ton Kosta c. *Ton Kosta with whom spoke the Anna? with the Kostas

(28) German a. Mit vem hat Anna gesprochen? b. Mit dem Hans c. ??Dem Hans with whom has Anna spoken? with the Hans

(29) Yiddish a. Mit vemen hot zi geredt? b. Mit Moshe c. ?? Moshe with whom has she spoken? c. *Ivanom


(31) Russian a. S kem ona govorila? b. S Ivan c. *Ivan with whom she spoke

(32) Bulgarian a. S koj e govorila Anna? b. S Ivan c. *Ivan with who AUX spoken Anna


This distribution is expected if the fragment undergoes movement, subject to language-particular constraints.

2.2.2 Islands

Perhaps the most striking confirmation that fragments move comes from the fact that they are sensitive to islands. This can be seen in three contexts. The first is in answers to implicit salient questions, discussed by Morgan (1973) and Hankamer (1979). When no island is present, such fragment answers are as licit as their sentential counterparts.

(34) a. Does Abby speak Greek fluently? b. No, Albanian c. No, she speaks Albanian fluently

(35) a. Did Abby claim she speaks Greek fluently? b. No, Albanian c. No, she claimed she speaks Albanian fluently

But when the correlate to the fragment is embedded in an island, only the sentential answer is possible: the fragment answer, since it requires movement out of the island, is barred:

(36) a. Does Abby speak the same Balkan language that Ben speaks? b. *No, Charlie c. No, she speaks the same Balkan language that Charlie speaks
(37) a. Did Ben leave the party because Abby wouldn’t dance with him?
b. *No, Beth
c. No, he left the party because Beth wouldn’t dance with him

(38) a. Did Abby vote for a Green Party candidate?
b. *No, Reform Party
d. No, she voted for a Reform Party candidate

The second context where island sensitivity can be observed is in answers to multiple questions:

(39) Who’s more likely to be influencing who? The CIA John Foreman, or John Foreman the CIA?

(40) a. Which committee member wants to hire someone who speaks which language?
b. Abby wants to hire someone who speaks Greek and Ben wants to hire someone who speaks Albanian
b. *Abby Greek, and Ben Albanian

Finally, it is well known that short answers to single questions with the question word embedded in an island, such as those found in Japanese and Chinese, are sensitive to islands (they require the pied-piping of the island; see Fiengo et al. 1988).

2.2.3 Complementizer deletion

Morgan (1973) presents a puzzle from complementizer deletion; he notes that while in situ complementizers can be deleted after verbs like believe, in fragment answers the complementizer must be present:

(41) What does no-one believe?
    #(That) I’m taller than I really am

(42) No-one believes (that) I’m taller than I really am

This is exactly the pattern found with movement of CPs, as expected on the present analysis:

(43) #(That) I’m taller than I really am, no-one believes

2.2.4 Polarity items

The distribution of polarity items in fragment answers cross-linguistically also patterns after their moveability in the relevant language, as Giannakidou (2000) shows. In English, a polarity item like anything can neither serve as a fragment answer nor be fronted.
(44) a. What didn’t Max read?  
   b. *Anything

(45) a. Max didn’t read anything  
   b. *Anything, Max didn’t read

In a language like Greek, however, as discussed in Giannakidou (2000), certain polarity items can be fronted; it is exactly these items which can also appear as fragment answers.

(46) TIPOTA  
   then idha
   n-thing.emphatic not I saw
   ‘I didn’t see anything’

(47) Q: Ti idhes?
    what you saw
   A: TIPOTA
    n-thing.emphatic
   ‘What did you see?’
    ‘Nothing’

2.2.5 Turkish bare objects vs. subjects

Hankamer (1979: 395) discusses the distribution of ‘bare’ DPs in Turkish (those occurring without the indefinite article/numeral bir ‘a/one’). While bare objects cannot be fronted, bare subjects can be. Expectedly, it is only bare subjects that can form licit fragment answers:

(48) Q: Hasan ne yaziyor?  A: * (Bir) mektup
   ‘What is Hasan writing?’  ‘(A) letter’

(49) Q: Hayvanlar in en aptal ne-dir?  A: AyI
   ‘Of the animals, the most stupid is what?’  ‘Bear’

2.2.6 Raising vs. control infinitivals

As Chomsky (1981: 62) points out, raising and control infinitivals differ in their moveability: control infinitivals can be fronted, as in clefts, while raising infinitivals cannot. Expectedly, control, but not raising, infinitivals can appear as fragment answers.

(50) a. *It’s [to procrastinate] that people tend
    b. Q: How do people tend to behave?
       A: *To procrastinate

(51) a. It’s [to get a job in Europe] that she wants
    b. Q: What does she really want?
       A: To get a job in Europe

2.2.7 Predicate answers

Answers which are predicates must include an entire VP, regardless of whether the semantics of the question would be satisfied with merely a V, as pointed out in Hankamer (1979: 239-243), and illustrated below.
(52)  A: What did he do to the car?  B: Totaled *(it)
(53)  A: What did she do with the spinach?  B: Washed *(it)
(54)  A: What did he do for his sister?  B: Funded *(her)

This follows on the present account as a consequence of structure preservation: movement to specFP is phrasal, not head, movement, so the minimal informative constituent that can be used as a fragment answer is the VP, not the V.

2.2.8 Pronominal answer restrictions

In languages with strong/weak pronoun distinctions, we find again a perfect correlation between those pronouns that can be fronted or occur at the left edge of the clause and those which can be used as fragment answers. Weak (or ‘clitic’) pronouns can do neither, while strong (or ‘tonic’) pronouns can do both. This is shown for Greek, French, German, and Dutch below.

(55)  Pjon idhes?  whom did you see?  Greek  
   a. Afton  him.strong  
   b. *Ton  him.weak
(56)  Il voulait qui?  he wanted who?  French  
   a. Moi  me.strong  
   b. *Me  me.weak
(57)  Was wolltest du?  what wanted 2sg you?  German  
   a. Das  that  
   b. *Es  it
(58)  Wie heeft ze gezien?  who has she seen?  Dutch  
   a. Jou  you.strong  
   b. *Je  you.weak
(59)  {Afton / *Ton}, ton idia. {him.strong/weak} him I saw  Greek
(60)  {Moi / *Me}, il me voulait. {me.strong/weak} he me wanted  French
(61)  {Das / *Es} wollte ich. {that/it} wanted I  German
(62)  {Jou / *Je} heeft ze gezien. {you.strong/weak} has she seen  Dutch

A similar distribution is found in English, as discussed by Yanofsky (1978), Napoli (1982), and Barton (1990). Only the ‘strong’, accusative form of pronouns can ordinarily occur in fragment answers. It is this form of the pronoun which similarly can bear focus on the left periphery of the clause as well.

(63)  Who watered the plants?  
   a. Me  b. *I
(64)  a. *Me watered the plants  b. I watered the plants
(65)  a. Me, I watered the plants  b. *I, I watered the plants
In sum, there is considerable reason to believe that fragment answers are syntactically fully sentential, but that ellipsis has rendered part of the clause unpronounced. This ellipsis is consistent with current views of ellipsis, which countenance only constituent deletion, only if the pronounced fragment undergoes movement to a clause-external position prior to the ellipsis. This theoretical requirement was seen to have substantial empirical support from a wide range of phenomena.

3. Discourse-initial (?) fragments

Having seen that ellipsis is implicated in the derivation of fragment answers, we are now in a position to examine the second kind of fragment that opened this paper, fragments with no linguistic antecedents at all, such as the following (repeated from (2)), said in response to an inquiring glance.

(66) Some guy she met at the park

Such fragments form the basis for the proposals made by Stainton in a series of papers (1995, 1997, 1998). The core of Stainton's argument can be stated as follows. Premise 1: Ellipsis requires linguistic antecedents. Premise 2: Such fragments do not have linguistic antecedents. Conclusion: These fragments do not involve ellipsis (by modus tollens).

Stainton's argument fails to go through because Premise 1 is false, however. While ellipses cannot occur in true discourse-intial contexts ("DI_{null}"), they can occur without previous utterances in the discourse ("DI_{lang}"). Such fragments, then, may indeed involve ellipsis, but of a limited kind, licensed by the discourse context in the absence of linguistic material that could serve as a more explicit antecedent. There is a considerable number of examples of DI_{lang} ellipses that have been discussed in the literature; I reproduce some of the most important ones below. (See Hankamer and Sag 1976, Schachter 1977, 1978, Hankamer 1978, Stanley 2000, Pullum 2001 for differing views on what to make of these data).

(67) a. [Miss Clairol advertisement] Does she or doesn't she? Only her hairdresser knows
b. [As a response to an offer of a second piece of chocolate cake] I really shouldn't
c. [As an invitation to dance] Shall we?
d. [Seeing someone about to do a shot of jenever] If you can, I can, too
e. [Looking at someone about to jump off a bridge] She won't
f. [Seeing someone about to light their head on fire] Don't!
As claimed by Hankamer (1978) and Pullum (2001), these have something of the flavor of utterance idioms, and seem to some extent to be conventionalized. What I claim is conventionalized, however, is simply the VP \([\text{VP do it}]\). The meaning of this VP is licensed by the discourse relevance of some action; it need not have a determinate propositional content. Thus I share the judgment of Stanley (2000), for example (and *pace* Hankamer and Sag 1976) about Hankamer and Sag’s (1976) example; there is no difference in grammaticality for the two variants in (68).

(68) [Harry Houdini, before an audience of thousands, is attempting to escape from a locked safe dangling under a blimp. One spectator says to another:]
   a. Do you think he’ll be able to do it?
   b. Do you think he’ll be able to?

The fact that the missing VP is *do it* also accounts for the following fact: while such \(D_{\text{lang}}\) VPs are possible in questions, as seen in (69), no extraction from the unpronounced VP is possible, as seen in (70).

(69) [Seeing three contestants about to buzz in]
   Who do you think will first?

(70) [Seeing a contestant about to pick among three choices]
   \(\ast\) {Which (one)/What} do you think she will?

Further, because the VP *do it* is restricted to non-statives, such \(D_{\text{lang}}\) uses should equally bar stative meanings; the correctness of this prediction is borne out in the following.

(71) [Abby has a ten-year-old younger sister, who she discovers one day in front of their mother’s dressoir. The younger sister has put on their mother’s clothes, done up her hair like their mother, put on their mother’s jewelry, and in general done everything possible to resemble their mother. She is in the very act of applying their mother’s lipstick when Abby enters the room and observes all this. Abby is horrified and shouts]
   Don’t!
   a. = *Don’t do it! (Here possibly = Don’t put on that lipstick!)*
   b. =/= *Don’t resemble our mother!*

The restriction to non-statives also explains why, although (72a) is a highly conventional invitation to dance, and if anything would therefore be expected to be found in such contexts with a reduced VP, (72b) is actually impossible in such a meaning, since \{like/care\} to dance is stative.
(72) [As an invitation to dance]
   a. Would you {like/care} to dance?
   b. #Would you?
   b'. Would you do it? =/= Would you {like/care} to dance?
Resolution of DI_{lang} deictics and/or pronominals is similar:
(73) [Responding to a puzzled glance at an unfamiliar person]
   {That/He}'s some guy she met at the park

Since such deictics and pronominals are licensed in DI_{lang} contexts, and
since the copula is similarly licensed, it is possible that DI_{lang} fragments have the
following derivation:
(74) [_{FP some guy she met at the park} \!<_{[_{TP he's t_1}]}\> ]

Initial support for the correctness of this analysis comes from case facts in
case-marking languages like Greek and German. The case that occurs on such
fragments is the nominative, the same case which occurs on predicate nominals
with the copula.
(75) Greek  a. Kapjos pu gnorise sto parko
   someone.NOM that she.met in.the park
   b. *Kapjon pu gnorise sto parko
      someone.ACC that she.met in.the park
(76) German a. Ein Typ, den sie im Park kennengelernt hat
   a.NOM guy that she.in.the park met has
   b. *Einen Typ, den sie im Park kennengelernt hat
      a.ACC guy that she.in.the park met has
(77) Greek  a. Aftos ine {kapjos/*kapjon} pu gnorise sto parko
   he is someone.NOM/someone.ACC that she.met in.the park
   German b. Das ist {ein/*einen} Typ, den sie im Park
   kennengelernt hat.
   that is a.NOM/la.ACC guy that she.in.the park
   met has

Other differences between sentential antecedents and fragment antecedents
to ellipsis discussed in Stainton (1998: 326) follow from the proposed analysis.
Since the unpronounced material in the fragment in (79) is equivalent to the
deictic and copula pronounced in (80), it comes as no surprise that the predicate
ellipsis in Mark's utterance is equally strange in both cases (since it is resolved
as "And Betty is the man from Paris, too", or at best, "And Betty is from Paris,
too" — in any case, not as "And Betty is at the door, too").
(78) Jason: The man from Paris is at the door
(79) Jason: The man from Paris
(80) Jason: That's the man from Paris

Mark: And Betty is, too
Mark: ?? And Betty is, too
Mark: ?? And Betty is too

Other predicates, in certain extremely limited and highly conventionalized contexts, may be elided as well. Perhaps the most common such context is one of ordering something from a waiter at a restaurant. In this context, a small range of elements (bring, give, I want, I'd like) can be elided, with the consequence that we observe the relevant case: in Greek accusative, in Russian the genitive (partitive).

(81) a. (Enan) kafe (parakalo)!
   a coffee.ACC please
   '(A) coffee (please)!

b. Ferte mou (en) kafe (parakalo)!
   bring.IMP me a coffee.ACC please
   'Bring me (a) coffee (please)!

(82) a. Vody (pozhalujsta)!
   water.GEN please
   '(Some) water (please)!

b. Dajte mne vody (pozhalujsta)!
   give.IMP me water.GEN please
   'Give me (some) water (please)!

The English equivalent in such contexts is underdetermined by its lack of distinguishing case morphology:

(83) Water!

The moral of all these examples is merely that richer contexts help to provide non-linguistic antecedents to ellipsis. This being the case, a ‘limited ellipsis’ analysis of fragments in DI_{lang} contexts is feasible, and no revision of the usual syntax-semantics-pragmatics interfaces are needed.

4. Conclusions

In brief, I have attempted to show that fragments can be analyzed within a conservative theory of the syntax-semantics interface, by positing ellipsis, or in some cases, a ‘limited ellipsis’ analysis. Ellipsis alone does not account for all the attested properties of fragments, however; we have seen that the full range of properties – the various connectivity effects in particular – falls out from the movement component of the proposed derivation. This movement furthermore
makes the ellipsis implicated in fragments consistent with our current understanding of ellipsis, one which permits only ellipsis of constituents.

References


