

Focus Structure and Acceptability in Verb Phrase Ellipsis

keywords: ellipsis, focus, information structure

The constraints governing the acceptability of verb phrase ellipsis have been a matter of debate for more than three decades. Using magnitude estimation, we demonstrate an interaction at the information structural level which has not been previously described and which is not predicted under any previous account of ellipsis licensing.

The traditional syntactic model (Sag 1976, among many others) holds that ellipsis is permitted in contexts where a syntactically matched antecedent is available. That model predicts contrasts like (1)-(2), where an elided VP that is syntactically matched to its antecedent (1) is acceptable, but one which is not matched (2) is unacceptable.

- (1) Kim looked into the problem, just like/because Lee did.
- (2) # The problem was looked into by Kim, just like/because Lee did. (Frazier & Clifton 2006)
- (3) This problem should have been looked into, but obviously nobody did. (Kehler 2000)

The model fails, however, to predict cases like (3), where mismatch is acceptable. Kehler (2000) argued that unacceptable mismatches tend to occur in *Parallel* coherence relations, while acceptable cases typically occur in some other type of relation, e.g. *Result*. Frazier and Clifton (2006) tested this proposal using stimuli like (2), which alternate between *just like*, signaling a *Parallel* relation, and *because*, signaling a *Result*. They found no evidence of increased acceptability in the *because* condition, and in fact reported a trend in the opposite direction.

The null result follows, we argue, from an information-structural confound in both sets of data. Sentences like (2) exhibit an *Argument-Focus* structure, which evokes a contrast between the passive agent of the antecedent, *Kim*, and the following subject, *Lee*. The sentence in (3), however, omits the passive agent, instead focusing the auxiliary verb *did*. This *Auxiliary-Focus* structure supports a modality contrast between the two clauses. Based on these observations, we hypothesized that the apparent syntactic constraint enforcing a structural match between an ellipsis and its antecedent is better characterized as an information structural constraint enforcing alignment of contrastive arguments, and that the pattern observed in (1)-(3) results from an interaction between argument alignment and focus structure.

To test this proposal we constructed stimuli like (4)-(5), using ‘tough constructions’ which permit alignment alternations without omitting arguments.

- (4a) Venomous snakes are easy to identify, and poisonous plants are as well. *aligned arg-focus*
- (4b) Venomous snakes are easy to identify, and most experienced hikers can. *not-aligned aux-focus*
- (5a) It’s easy to identify venomous snakes, and poisonous plants are as well. *not-aligned arg-focus*
- (5b) It’s easy to identify venomous snakes, and most experienced hikers can. *aligned aux-focus*

In (4a-b), the logical object of *identify* appears in subject position; in (5a-b) it appears in-situ. By pairing these alternations with follow-ons which focus either the subject argument (4a/5a) or the auxiliary (4b/5b) of the ellipsis, we arrived at a 2x2 design crossing argument alignment (aligned/not-aligned) and focus structure (argument/auxiliary focus). Magnitude estimation results show a reliable interaction where lack of alignment leads to a greater reduction in acceptability in the argument-focus condition than in the auxiliary-focus condition.

These results suggest that the degradation of sentences like (2) is due in part to an information-structural violation which occurs independently of ellipsis. We tested this in a second experiment which paired stimuli like (2) with no-ellipsis versions like (6).

- (6) The problem was looked into by Kim, just like/because Lee looked into it. (cf. 2)

We replicated Frazier and Clifton’s finding of increased acceptability in the *just like* condition, but found no main effect of ellipsis, supporting our claim that the failure to align contrastive arguments leads to an independent violation. These results, we argue, support a re-formulation of the theory of ellipsis, where sensitivity to syntactic structure is predicted based on interactions at the information structural level.

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References

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