

“Silence is golden”

The syntax of ellipsis

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“Silence is golden”

Ellipsis (according to the first hit on Google):

(plural *ellipses* or "three little points of suspension"; from the Greek *élleipsis*, "omission") is a mark or series of marks that usually indicate an intentional omission of a word in the original text. An ellipsis can also be used to indicate a pause in speech, an unfinished thought, or, at the end of a sentence, a trailing off into silence. When placed at the end of a sentence, the ellipsis can also inspire a feeling of melancholy longing.

Colloquially: dot-dot-dot “...”

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ellipsis>



“Silence is golden”

This is:

An introductory course to ellipsis

= for linguists who know the basics of syntax, and might have some idea of what ellipsis is, but not really.

This is not:

- * An introductory course in syntax
(although I will do my best to explain everything as clearly as I can)
- * An advanced course in ellipsis



“Silence is golden”: Overview

Class 1: “If you do not understand my silence, how will you understand my words?”

→ What is ellipsis and why study it?

Class 2: “Silence best speaks the mind.”

→ Analyses for ellipsis

Class 3: “It’s a great thing to know the season for speech and the season for silence.”

→ Conditions on ellipsis

Class 4: “You have the right to remain silent.”

→ The syntactic licensing of ellipsis

Class 5: “Nobody understands the silence of things.”

→ VP ellipsis and other elliptical mysteries



“If you do not understand my silence,
how will you understand my words”

unknown author

EGG 2010

Class 1



If you do not understand my silence,
how will you understand my words?

1. What is ellipsis?
2. What is not ellipsis?
3. Why is it interesting?
4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there?
5. Elliptical variation



1. What is ellipsis? (1)

Working definition:

Ellipsis is a mismatch between sound and meaning in which certain selectional requirements are not met in the phonetic realization.



1. What is ellipsis? (2)

(1) Ryan has made a mojito, and Jasmin has, too.

Interpretation (meaning):

Ryan has made a mojito, and Jasmin has made a mojito, too.

Phonetic realization (sound):

Ryan has made a mojito, and Jasmin has __, too.

→ The verb phrase selected for by the perfective auxiliary *has* is left unpronounced.



1. What is ellipsis? (3)

Ryan has made a mojito,...

= antecedent

...and Jasmin has [made a mojito], too.

= ellipsis site



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2. What is **not** ellipsis? (1)

Not all expressions with a mismatch between sound and meaning are considered ellipsis in the generative framework

→ Borderlines and gray areas:
cases in which there does not seem to be any syntax



2. What is **not** ellipsis? (2)

Signs, labels, titles:

- (2) a. *Minute Maid* (label on a box of fruit juice)
Interpretation: This is a box of Minute Maid.
- b. *Gent 40 km* (sign next to the highway)
Interpretation: The distance from here to Ghent is 40 kilometers.
- c. *Toy Story 3* (title on a movie poster)
Interpretation: The title of this movie is *Toy Story 3*.



2. What is **not** ellipsis? (3)

Certain fixed expressions:

(3) a. Germany–England: 4 – 1

Interpretation: The soccer team of Germany beat the soccer team of England by 4 goals to 1.

b. Good morning, Jeff!

Interpretation: I wish you a good morning, Jeff.

c. Happy birthday!

Interpretation: I wish you a happy birthday.



2. What is **not** ellipsis? (4)

Conversational implicatures (Grice 1975)

- (4) a. There's quite a draft.
Interpretation: Close the window.
- b. It's raining.
Interpretation: It's raining here, right now.
- c. Jeff: Are you coming to Jane's party?
Julia: I have to work tomorrow.
Interpretation: I can't come to the party.



2. What is **not** ellipsis? (5)

These get an interpretation richer than what is phonetically expressed, but the additional information does not seem to be present in the syntax.

→ **Generally not considered ellipsis**



2. What is **not** ellipsis? (6)

Note: It is not always clear whether an expression contains syntax or not.

→ headlines, diary style writing, directions, recipes, instructions

- (5) a. Woman wins lottery at first attempt
b. Went to see Bob Dylan today.
c. Turn left after second traffic light.
d. Add eggs and stir, then let rest.
e. If no paper, turn wheel.

→ unclear whether these cases involve ellipsis or not.

→ I do not discuss them and focus on clearer cases.



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3. Why is it interesting? (1)

F. De Saussure:

“A linguistic system is a series of differences of sounds combined with a series of differences of ideas.”

→ Language = sound combined with meaning



3. Why is it interesting? (2)

Ellipsis = a mismatch between sound and meaning

→ There is more meaning than sound.

J. Merchant:

“Ellipsis constitutes the ultimate challenge for sound-meaning correspondence.”



3. Why is it interesting? (3)

Rizzi (1986):

Two separate conditions on empty elements

- Recovery condition: how traces, *pro*, ellipsis sites and PRO are identified.
- Formal licensing condition: Generalized ECP (Chomsky 1981)



3. Why is it interesting? (4)

Empty Category Principle (Chomsky 1981, ECP):
All traces must be properly governed

Proper government:

A properly governs B if A theta-governs B or A antecedent-governs B.

A theta-governs B iff A governs B and A theta-marks B.

A antecedent-governs B iff A governs B and is coindexed with B.



3. Why is it interesting? (5)

Object extraction:

(6) Who did Jeff say that Ryan saw t_{who} ?

The verb *see* both governs and theta-marks t_{who}
→ The trace is theta-governed

Subject extraction:

(7) Who t_{who} said that?

The *wh* word governs t_{who} and is coindexed with it
→ The trace is antecedent-governed



3. Why is it interesting? (6)

Formal licensing condition: Generalized ECP

- Link between movement traces, ellipsis sites and *pro*.
- Studying ellipsis can teach us about empty categories in general.



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4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (1)

1. Sluicing

(11) Roy invited someone, but I don't know who.

Interpretation:

Roy invited someone, but I don't know who ~~Roy~~ invited.

→ What is missing?

The entire clause except for the *wh* element
= IP ellipsis



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (2)

2. VP ellipsis

- (12) a. Roy likes strawberries, but Jen doesn't.
b. Roy has bought cream, and Jen has, too.

Interpretation:

..., but Jen doesn't ~~like strawberries~~.

..., and Jen has ~~bought cream~~, too.

→ What is missing?

The verb phrase (= the non-finite verb and its internal arguments)



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (3)

3. NP ellipsis

- (13) a. Roy's older brother is taller than Jeff's.
b. Steve bought these pants and Jeff bought those.

Interpretation:

Roy's older brother is taller than Jeff's ~~older brother~~.
Steve bought these pants and Jeff bought those ~~pants~~.

→ What is missing?

The noun phrase (= the noun, its complement and adjectival modifiers)



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (4)

4. Gapping

- (14) a. Lola's brother gave her strawberries, and her sister cherries.
b. Lola wants to study in the garden, and Jen in the library.

Interpretation:

..., and her sister ~~gave Lola~~ cherries.

..., and Jen ~~wants to study~~ in the library.

→ What is missing?

The entire clause except for two arguments
(or one argument and one adjunct)



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (5)

5. Stripping (= Bare argument ellipsis)

- (15) a. Roy likes strawberries, and Jen, too.
b. Roy wanted to buy cream, but not Jen.

Interpretation:

..., and Jen ~~likes strawberries~~, too.

..., but **not** Jen ~~wanted to buy cream~~.

→ What is missing?

The entire clause except for 1 argument
(and one negation or intensifier)



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (6)

6. Pseudogapping

(16) Roy ate strawberries, and Jen did cherries.

Interpretation:

Roy ate strawberries, and Jen did ~~eat~~ cherries.

→ What is missing?

The verb phrase except for 1 internal argument



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (7)

7. Fragment answers

(17) What did Roy eat? – Strawberries.

Interpretation:

~~Roy ate~~ strawberries.

→ What is missing?

The entire clause except for 1 constituent.



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (8)

8. Comparative ellipsis

- (18)
- a. Roy ate more strawberries than Jane did.
 - b. Roy ate more strawberries than Jane did cherries.
 - c. They have to fear more from us than we from them.



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (9)

Interpretation:

a. Roy ate more strawberries than Jane did ~~eat~~.

= VP ellipsis

b. Roy ate more strawberries than Jane did ~~eat~~
cherries.

= Pseudogapping

c. They have to fear more from us than we ~~have~~
~~to fear~~ from them.

= gapping

→ What is missing?

Part of a comparative clause (the size of the ellipsis site varies).



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (9')

Comparatives

= ACD contexts

= Antecedent-contained deletion

→ The relative clause involves Operator movement to the embedded Spec of CP

(18') a. Roy ate more strawberries than Jane did.

b. Roy ate more strawberries_i [_{CP} than
[_{IP} Jane did [_{VP} eat t_{Op}]]].

Op_i



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (10)

9. Null Complement Anaphora (NCA)

(19) I asked Jeff to help me, but he refused.

Interpretation:

I asked Jeff to help me, but he refused ~~to help me~~.

→ What is missing?

The entire complement clause.



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (11)

10. Spading (subtype of sluicing)

Remember sluicing?

(20) Roy invited someone, but I don't know who.

Dutch:

(21) Maaïke heeft iemand uitgenodigd, maar ik weet niet wie.



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (12)

Dutch dialects:

(22) Maaike heeft iemand uitgenodigd, maar ik
Maaike has someone invited but I
weet nie wie da.
know not who that

Interpretation:

(23) ..., maar ik weet nie wie ~~dat~~ da is
but I know not who that_{compl} that_{dem} is
~~da~~—Maaike uitgenodigd heeft.
that_{compl} Maaike invited has



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (13)

→ What is missing?

The entire clause except for the *wh* element and the demonstrative pronoun.

(van Craenenbroeck 2004, 2010)



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (14)

11. Swiping (subtype of sluicing)

(24) He was giving a lecture, but I don't know what about.

Interpretation:

He was giving a lecture, but I don't know what ~~he was giving a lecture~~ about.

→ What is missing?

The entire clause except for a *wh* element and a preposition.



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (15)

11. Modal Complement Ellipsis (MCE)

Dutch:

(25) Ik wil je wel helpen, maar ik kan niet.
I want you PRT help but I can not

Interpretation:

Ik wil je wel helpen, maar ik kan ~~je niet helpen~~.

→ What is missing?

The verbal complement of the modal (= the infinitive and its internal arguments)



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (16)

Why isn't this just VP ellipsis?

Because Dutch (and many other languages) do not have VP ellipsis as we see it in English:

(26)* Mo heeft kersen gekocht en Julie heeft ook.
Mo has cherries bought and Julie has too
'Mo has bought cherries and Julie has, too.'

MCE is only possible with modal verbs.



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (16)

12. Conjunction reduction

(27) Roy will buy strawberries and serve them with cream.

Interpretation:

Roy will buy strawberries and ~~Roy will~~ serve them with cream.

→ What is missing?

The left part of the non-first conjunct(s) of a coordination.



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (17)

This is generally not considered to be ellipsis, however!

Conjunction reduction involves low coordination:

[Roy will [[_{VP} buy strawberries] and [_{VP} serve them with cream]].



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (18)

13. Right Node Raising (RNR)

(28) Roy likes but Jen dislikes rabbit pie with mashed potatoes and gravy.

Interpretation:

Roy likes ~~rabbit pie with mashed potatoes and gravy~~ but Jen dislikes rabbit pie with mashed potatoes and gravy.

→ What is missing?

The right part of the first conjunct in a coordination.



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (19)

This is generally not considered to be ellipsis either!

RNR is claimed to involve movement of the common chunk out of both conjuncts to the right:

[[Roy likes t_i but Jen dislikes t_i][rabbit pie with mashed potatoes and gravy] $_i$].

Alternative: Multiple Dominance

But see Ha (2006) for an ellipsis account!



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (20)

14. Topic drop and pro drop languages

Dutch:

(29) Ken je De Vliegeraar? – Ja, heb ik net
know you The Kite.Runner yes have I just
gelezen.
read

Interpretation:

Ja, die heb ik net gelezen. → topic drop
yes that have I just read



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (21)

Italian:

(30) Sono felice di vederti.
be.1sg happy to see.you

Interpretation:

I~~ø~~ sono felice di vederti. → pro drop
I be.1sg happy to see.you



4. Which kinds of ellipsis are there? (22)

→ What is missing?

Only one word (topic or subject pronoun)

These phenomena are not normally taken together with ellipsis, although they might very well be part of the same mechanism.



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5. Elliptical variation (1)

- ① Variation between ellipses
- ② Cross-linguistic variation



5. Elliptical variation (2)

① Variation between ellipses

Lobeck (1995):

VP ellipsis
Sluicing



Gapping
Stripping



5. Elliptical variation (3)

- Coordination vs subordination
- Embedded clauses
- Backward anaphora



5. Elliptical variation (3)

- Coordination vs subordination

Gapping and stripping only occur in coordinations, not in subordinations.

Sluicing and VP ellipsis can occur in both coordination and subordination.



5. Elliptical variation (4)

Gapping

- (31) a. Gonzo wants to eat peas, and Lola carrots.
b. Gonzo wants to eat peas, but Lola carrots.

Stripping

- (32) a. Gonzo wants to eat peas, and carrots too.
b. Gonzo wants to eat peas, but not carrots.



5. Elliptical variation (5)

Gapping

- (33) a. *Gonzo wants to eat peas, although Lola carrots.
b. *Gonzo wants to eat peas, because Lola carrots.

Stripping

- (34) a. *Gonzo wants to eat peas, because Lola too.
b. *Gonzo wants to eat peas, although not carrots.



5. Elliptical variation (6)

Sluicing

- (35) a. Someone was snoring, and I don't know who.
b. Someone was snoring, but I don't know who.

VP ellipsis

- (36) a. Gonzo likes peas, and Lola does too.
b. Gonzo likes peas, but Lola doesn't.



5. Elliptical variation (7)

Sluicing

- (37) a. I know someone was snoring, although I don't know who.
b. I can't ask anyone to help me, because I wouldn't know who.

VP ellipsis

- (38) a. Gonzo likes peas, although Lola doesn't.
b. Gonzo doesn't like peas because Lola doesn't.



5. Elliptical variation (8)

- Embedded clauses

Gapping and stripping cannot have a different level of embedding from their antecedent.

VP ellipsis and sluicing can have a different level of embedding from their antecedent.



5. Elliptical variation (9)

Gapping

- (39) a. *Gonzo wants to eat peas, and I think that
Lola carrots.
- b. *[I think that Gonzo likes peas], and Lola
[likes] carrots.

Stripping

- (40) a. *Gonzo wants to eat peas, and I think that
Lola too.
- b. *[I think that Gonzo likes peas], and
[~~Gonzo likes~~] carrots.



5. Elliptical variation (10)

Sluicing

- (41) a. Someone was snoring, and I don't know who.
b. I know someone was snoring, but who?

VP ellipsis

- (42) a. Gonzo likes peas, but he says that Lola doesn't.
b. Gonzo says he likes peas, and Lola certainly does.



5. Elliptical variation (11)

- Backwards anaphora

Langacker (1966): Backwards anaphora constraint
An ellipsis can precede, but not c-command, its antecedent.

Gapping and stripping cannot precede their antecedent.

VP ellipsis and sluicing can precede their antecedent.



5. Elliptical variation (12)

Gapping

- (43) a. *Although Lola carrots, Gonzo wants to eat peas.
b. *Lola carrots, and Gonzo wants to eat peas.

Stripping

- (44) a. *Although not carrots, Gonzo wants to eat peas.
b. *Not carrots, but Gonzo wants to eat peas.



5. Elliptical variation (13)

Sluicing

(45) Although I don't know who, I can hear someone is snoring.

VP ellipsis

(46) Although Gonzo doesn't, Lola likes peas a lot.



5. Elliptical variation (14)

② Cross-linguistic variation

Differences in range:

IP ellipsis (sluicing, gapping, stripping, fragment answers...) is very common.

VP ellipsis is rare.



5. Elliptical variation (15)

Sluicing (Merchant 2001)

(47) a. English

Lola spoke with someone, but I don't know
(with) who.

b. Frisian

Lola hat mei ien sprutsen, mar ik wyt
Lola has with one spoken but I know
net mei wa.
not with who



5. Elliptical variation (16)

c. Danish

Lola har snakket med en eller anden,
Lola has spoken with one or other
men jeg ved ikke med hvem.
but I know not with who

d. Greek

I Lola milise me kapjon, alla dhe
the Lola spoke with someone but not
ksero me pjon.
I.know with who



5. Elliptical variation (17)

e. Dutch

Lola heeft met iemand gepraat, maar ik
Lola has with someone spoken but I
weet niet met wie.
know not with who

f. French

Lola a parlé avec quelqu'un, mais je
Lola has spoken with someone but I
ne sais pas avec qui.
NE know not with who



5. Elliptical variation (18)

g. Russian

Lola govorila s kemto, no ne znaju

Lola spoke with someone but not I.know

s kem.

with who

h. Catalan

La Lola va parlar amb algú, però no

the Lola AUX speak with someone but not

sé amb qui.

I.know with who



5. Elliptical variation (19)

VP ellipsis

(48) a. English

Lola has seen Gonzo, but Jen hasn't.

b. German

*Lola hat Gonzo gesehen, aber Jen hat nicht.

Lola has Gonzo seen but Jen has not

c. Swedish

*Lola har sett Gonzo, men Jen har inte.

Lola has seen Gonzo but Jen has not



5. Elliptical variation (20)

d. Dutch

*Lola heeft Gonzo gezien, maar Jen heeft
*Lola has Gonzo seen but Jen has
niet.
not*

e. French

*Lola a vu Gonzo, mais Jen n'a pas.
Lola has seen Gonzo, but Jen NE-has not



5. Elliptical variation (21)

② Cross-linguistic variation

Differences in properties:

- Variation in sluicing
- Variation in VP ellipsis



5. Elliptical variation (22)

Sluicing in English

- (49) a. Lola saw someone, but I don't know who.
b. *Lola saw someone, and I think that Gonzo.

→ Sluicing is only allowed in constituent questions.



5. Elliptical variation (23)

Sluicing in Hungarian

(50) a. János meghívott egy lányt, de nem tudo
John invited a girl.ACC but not know
kit.

who.ACC

b. János meghívott valakit és azt
John invited someone.ACC and that.ACC
hiszem hogy bélát.

think that Béla.ACC

'John invited someone and I think it was
Béla he invited.'

(Hungarian, van Craenenbroeck & Lipták 2006)



5. Elliptical variation (24)

Sluicing in Romanian

(51) a. Cineva mi-a mâncat prăjiturile,
someone CL.1SG-PAST.3sg eaten cookies.the
dar nu știu cine.
but not know.1SG who

'Someone ate my cookies, but I don't know who.'

b. Am aflat că cineva a plecat,
past.1SG learned that someone past.3SG left
dar nu știu dacă Ion.
but not know.1SG if Ion

'I found out that someone left, but I don't if it was Ion.'

(Romanian, Hoyt & Theodorescu 2004)



5. Elliptical variation (25)

- Some languages allow sluicing where the sluice contains a focus element other than a *wh* item.
= focus sluicing?
- Cross-linguistic variation: Sluicing is not limited to constituent questions in all languages.



5. Elliptical variation (26)

VP ellipsis in verb raising languages.

VP ellipsis in English:

(52) Gonzo likes carrots and Lola does too.

English main verbs do not raise to T:

(53) *Gonzo likes carrots and Lola likes, too.



5. Elliptical variation (27)

VP ellipsis in V raising languages:

VP ellipsis in Hebrew (Doron 1999):

(54) A: Šalaxt etmol et ha-yeladim le-
send.PAST2FSG yesterday ACC the-children to-
beit-ha-sefer?

house-the-book

'Did you send [the children to school yesterday] ?'

B: Šalaxti.

send.PAST1FSG

'I did.'



5. Elliptical variation (28)

VP ellipsis in Irish (McCloskey 1991):

(55) *Dúirt mé go gceannóinn é agus
said I COMP buy.CONDIT1SG it and
buy.PAST*

cheannaigh.

Lit: 'Said I that would buy (I) it and bought.

'I said I would buy it and I did.'



5. Elliptical variation (29)

VP ellipsis in Swahili (Ngonyani 1996):

(54) Mama a-li-tak-a ku-m-nunul-i-a
mother 1SU-PAST-want-FV INFIN-1OBJ-buy-APPLIC-FV
m-toto vi-atu na baba a-li-tak-a pia.

1-child 8-shoe and father 1Su-Past-WANT-FV also

Lit: 'Mother wanted to buy the child shoes and
father wanted too.'

'Mother wanted to buy the child shoes and father
did too.'

→ V(erb)-stranding VP ellipsis (Goldberg 2005)



Summary (1)

- ① Ellipsis = a mismatch between sound and meaning in which certain selectional requirements are not met in the phonetic realization.
- ② Ellipsis comes in various forms:
 - sluicing
 - NP ellipsis
 - stripping
 - fragment answers
 - spading
 - MCE
 - (conjunction reduction)
 - VP ellipsis
 - gapping
 - pseudogapping
 - comparative deletion
 - swiping
 - (RNR)
 - (topic/subject drop)

→ Variation in ellipsis: range, properties.



Summary (2)

Ellipsis	What is deleted?
sluicing	entire clause minus <i>wh</i> item
VP ellipsis	verb phrase
NP ellipsis	noun phrase
gapping	entire clause minus 2 constituents
stripping	entire clause minus 1 element & intensifier
pseudogapping	verb phrase minus 1 constituent
fragment answers	entire clause minus 1 constituent
comparative ellipsis	varying ellipsis sites, in comparative
spading	entire clause minus <i>wh</i> item & <i>da</i>
swiping	entire clause minus <i>wh</i> item & preposition
MCE	infinitival complement of a modal
RNR	right part of the first conjunct
conjunction reduction	left part of the second conjunct
topic/subject drop	topic or subject pronoun



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The syntax of ellipsis

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