Contrastivity and Deletion: A Feature-Based Account of Ellipsis

In this paper I put forward a uniform account for ellipsis (specifically, VP ellipsis (1), Pseudogapping (2), Gapping (3), and Sluicing (4)), based on Merchant’s (2001, 2004) E-feature, and implemented in terms of contrastivity.

(1) Claire read a book, and Heather did too. \(\text{(VP ellipsis)}\)
(2) Claire read more books than Heather did magazines. \(\text{(Pseudogapping)}\)
(3) Claire read a book and Heather a magazine. \(\text{(Gapping)}\)
(4) Claire read a book but I don’t know which. \(\text{(Sluicing)}\)

In Merchant’s (2001) analysis of Sluicing (5), the E-feature is introduced. In Sluicing, it moves from T to C, checking [+wh, +Q] features, and causing the complement of C, i.e. TP, to be deleted.

(5) Claire read a book but I don’t know \([_{CP} \text{which}_{[_{CIE} \text{TP}_{\text{Claire read}+}] Walton}]\)

This E-feature is based on the notion of E-Givenness, modelled on Schwarzchild’s (1999) Givenness, thereby introducing a relation to focus in ellipsis structures, since a phrase can be deleted only if it is e-GIVEN (cf. Merchant 2001), i.e. if it has a proper antecedent.

Building on this analysis, I propose that it be slightly modified to account for other ellipsis types as well, in its interaction with contrastivity. I suggest first that the distribution of the E-feature hinges, as is also implied in Merchant’s use of the E-feature in Sluicing, on the head that is redundant with respect to the antecedent, and subsequently to be deleted. However, I depart from Merchant’s analysis by assuming that the E-feature does not need to move to a higher position but may stay in its original position. As a consequence, the nature of the E-feature is such that it doesn’t cause the deletion of the sister of the head on which it rests, but rather triggers the deletion of the maximal projection of the head in question. That this implementation is possible is shown in the Pseudogapping example in (6), which employs an additional feature, the EPP feature (in Lasnik’s 1995, 1999 terms).

(6) ... than \([_{TP} \text{Heather}_{[_{TFP} \text{did}_{[_{AGROPEPP} \text{magazines}_{[_{VP}_{\text{read}+}_{[_{NP}_{\text{a}_{E}]}]}]}]}]}]\)

In this case, it is not clear why featural movement of the E-feature up to the AgrO position should be necessary, since although the E-feature for Pseudogapping might be checked against the EPP feature, this cannot be the case in VP ellipsis, where neither AgrOP nor the EPP (for objects) occur. However, there, the full VP is deleted, as in Pseudogapping.

Still, the E-feature may indeed interact with another feature, namely a contrastive feature on the element contrasted with its antecedent, a feature that (a) captures the impossibility of deleting focused or new material, and (b) triggers movement of contrasted elements out of the phrase marked for deletion. This is not only applicable for the Pseudogapping structure in (6), but also holds for Sluicing, if we consider the moved wh-element to be somewhat contrastive to (or, at least, less specified than) its counterpart in the antecedent. Moreover, the combination of the E-feature with a contrastivity feature allows us to treat gapping as ellipsis, more specifically, TP deletion, and to account for the need of a contrastive subject in the Gapping cases, as illustrated in (7).

 b. *Claire read a book, and she a magazine.
 c. Claire, read a book, and SHE\(_{v}\) a magazine.

Suppose that in Gapping, the E-feature is also placed on “redundant” elements, namely, T and V. Then, the derivation could proceed as in Pseudogapping, with the remnant moving up to [Spec, AgrOP]. However, the E-feature on T would prohibit the presence of focused material in its complement position, hence, the complement needs to move higher up in the clause. As it cannot cross the subject, I suggest that the subject moves as well, namely to the specifier of a Topic phrase in a split CP structure (modelled on Rizzi 1997). Likewise, the contrastive object remnant moves higher up into the specifier of a Focus phrase, situated below the Topic phrase. Assuming that elements acquire focus when moved into a focal position, this would account for (a) the general contrastivity of the subject in Gapping, and (b) the non-coreferential reading if the subject pronoun is focused, as in (7) (where capitals indicate focus). The gapping derivation of (7) would then look as in (8).

(8) ... and \([_{TOP} \text{Heather}_{[_{FOC} a_{magazine}_{[_{TP}_{k}_{[_{TFE}_{[_{AGROPEPP}_{k}_{[_{VP}_{\text{read}+}_{[_{NP}_{\text{a}_{E}]}]}]}]}]}]}]}]\)

Hence, the modification of the mechanism invoked by the E-feature, in combination with a contrastivity feature on contrastive elements, permits a uniform picture of various types of ellipsis.
References


