On the source of non-isomorphism in constituent ellipsis

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This talk presents the results of an in-progress investigation into the explanatory source of non-isomorphism between antecedents and elided material in clausal ellipsis. Ellipsis non-isomorphism has typically been understood as the consequence either of a semantic identity condition (Merchant, 2001; Potsdam, 2007; Thoms, 2013), or of lexico-syntactic conditions whose definition permits some forms of non-isomorphism in a principled way (Thoms, 2015; Murphy, 2016; Ranero, 2021). Whatever the commitment about the formulation of the identity relation, the domain being compared with an antecedent for identity has usually taken to be coextensive with the ellipsis site itself. Recent findings — from Hebrew argument ellipsis of CPs (Landau, 2023), Spanish Wh-Topic-Remnant Elided Questions (Stigliano, 2022), and English sluicing (Rudin, 2019; Anand et al., To appear, 2021) challenge this presupposition, suggesting instead that the domain under evaluation for syntactic head-to-head identity may (or must) be a proper subset of the domain that is elided.

This set of moves opens new sets of questions and investigative directions, including the question of what the domain-based approaches to ellipsis identity might lead one to expect about crosslinguistic variation in ellipsis identity, and about the acquisition of such patterns. The talk explores three potential responses to such a state of affairs. First, there is the possibility that (i) the non-isomorphisms in e.g. Spanish, Hebrew, and English can still be derived from a theory that takes the domain of identity to be co-extensive with the ellipsis site itself, employing a looser isomorphism condition that permits certain mismatches. Second, there is the possibility that (ii) the domain evaluated for identity may be either coextensive with the elided constituent, or a proper subset of the elided constituent — defining a new axis of variation. Finally, there is the possibility that (iii) the domain of ellipsis identity is systematically smaller that the elided constituent.

Each of the positions articulated in (i)–(iii) makes distinct and fine-grained predictions about matching between antecedents and ellipsis sites in constituent ellipsis. This talk presents novel, primarily corpus-based, evidence from three types of Russian TP ellipsis — sluicing, stripping, and fragment answers — and compares this evidence against the predictions of (i)–(iii). The results support a view of ellipsis identity like (ii), in which that the domain relevant to ellipsis identity can vary in size, introducing a novel axis of variation in ellipsis. Building directly on the work of Aelbrecht (2010) and Stigliano (2022), I sketch a picture of the kinds of theoretical commitments that could give rise to such variation in the first place.

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