Abstract

The syntax of silence: Sluicing, islands, and identity in ellipsis

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This dissertation investigates one of the most cross-linguistically widespread forms of ellipsis: sluicing. Its goals are both empirical and theoretical. Empirically, the dissertation documents sluicing data from thirty-one languages and establishes a number of novel and partly surprising generalizations, which indicate \textit{inter alia} that the form of the wh-remnant in sluicing reaches its position external to the ellipsis site by movement. This result stands in direct conflict with the contention, first articulated in Ross 1969 and unchallenged to date, that islands are not respected under sluicing. Theoretically, then, the dissertation aims to reconcile these apparently contradictory strands of evidence.

The proposal advanced here is that the usual operation of movement is involved in the derivation of sluicing, and that the IP out of which the wh-remnant is displaced is deleted at PF. This allows for a maximally simple syntax of ellipsis: it is simply the syntax of usual clauses, not pronounced. Although the deletion occurs at PF, I argue that the identity condition on this deletion is essentially semantic, not structural. To this end, I propose a semantic condition on ellipsis, building on Rooth 1992a but replacing his structural isomorphism requirement, and show how this proposal solves a number of problems encountered by structural accounts, including the phenomenon dubbed ‘vehicle change’ by Fiengo and May 1994. The syntactic licensing conditions on IP-deletion and the semantic identification condition are unified by assigning a semantics
that imposes the identity condition to the syntactic feature that licenses the ellipsis. This general approach—sluicing as wh-movement followed by deletion—directly accounts for the generalizations concerning the form of the wh-phrase in sluicing.

The behavior of islands under sluicing, it is then argued, falls into two classes. For one large class of islands, including relative clauses and adjuncts, island insensitivity under ellipsis is only apparent. The desired interpretations of the elliptical clause can be generated by using independently needed mechanisms for resolving E-type anaphora and modal subordination; the wh-movement in these cases remains local, and island-respecting. For the second class of islands, such as COMP-trace phenomena and left branch effects, a more surprising conclusion is reached: these island effects arise at PF, not as a result of constraints on syntactic movement directly, and can be therefore be repaired by PF-deletion.

The analysis of sluicing defended here thus supports a pluralistic view of islandhood where various parts of the grammar interact to constrain extractions, and integrates sluicing into a general theory of ellipsis, dispensing with the sluicing-specific operations or stipulations previously thought to be necessary.