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Some thoughts on specified ellipsis

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As I look back on the development of generative grammar over the past decades, there are many turns that are far from easy to understand, especially where the less mainstream aspects of the theory are concerned. One of these is the fate of specified deletion.

Deletion rules were part and parcel of early generative grammar. Early accounts of complementation, for example, made use of a considerable variety of deletion (or erasure) rules, including *it*-deletion, *that*-deletion, *for*-deletion alongside the famous Equi-NP-Deletion (Identity Erasure).[1] Two major subtypes could be distinguished: deletions under identity, such as Equi-NP-Deletion, Comparative Ellipsis, VP-Deletion and many others, and specified deletions such as the deletion of *it, that, for* etc.

At a time when the existence of transformational rules could still be considered somewhat controversial, an interesting question that had to be addressed was whether deletion could be handled by phrase structure rules alone. Bach (1974), based on the earlier Bach (1964), presents an interesting argument, for example, that a rule like *you*-deletion, which is assumed to account for the absence of the subject in imperatives, should not be handled by a phrase structure rule of the type *you* $\rightarrow \emptyset$. The reason he gives is that we would then have a null string in the tree which is a constituent of the type *you,* even though *you* is not a constituent type at all (Bach 1974:41).

Deletion under identity was soon to be abolished in favor of interpretive rules applying to empty elements. This was one of the consequences of the debates between generative semantics and interpretive semantics in the late sixties and early seventies. Most prominently, Equi-NP-Deletion was replaced by empty pronominal elements whose interpretation was determined by a rule of (subject) control. This development was, of course, a natural one in view of the wide-spread introduction of a variety of empty elements such as NP-traces, *wh*-traces, PRO and pro. And the conditions under which some such empty element could be coindexed with or controlled by some antecedent had to be part of the general system of constraints that was intended to allow the reduction of the descriptive richness of transformations to minimal statements of the type 'move α' and, presumably, 'control α'.

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[1] See Rosenbaum (1967) as just one typical example.

That left specified deletion, that is, the deletion of specific (subclasses of) lexical items in certain specified contexts. The conditions under which such deletion rules could apply were, of course, originally stated in the structural descriptions of each individual deletion transformation. But here as well, a generalized theory was felt to be preferable. Ideally, such a theory would amount to the claim that there is one generalized deletion rule, 'delete α', which would be subject to a set of powerful constraints that would prevent massive overgeneration and ensure proper application in specific languages. Chomsky and Lasnik (1977) was an important step in that direction. *That*-deletion, *for*-deletion, and *wh*-deletion were abandoned and replaced by a rule of Free Deletion in COMP, supplemented by a number of general constraints that include Recoverability of Deletion and the Doubly Filled COMP Filter. A promising approach, it seems.

From here on things get murkier. In *Lectures on Government and Binding* (Chomsky 1981), Free Deletion in COMP is abandoned in favor of optional expansion of COMP, an idea from Chomsky (1980) and an interesting return to the issue of deletion being (or not being) the result of phrase structure rules discussed above. More generally, it is not clear to me what guides Chomsky's choice here. A consequence, in fact, is that we still need a deletion rule to take care of the disappearance of *wh*-elements in English relatives. As Chomsky puts it: "We now have no need for a rule of deletion in COMP apart from the *wh*-phrase of relatives (*the man (who) you saw*), some residual problems concerning *for* in English, and the trace of *wh*-phrases in COMP" (Chomsky 1981:54). Why this should be an improvement remains unclear to me. It is true that the idea of filters was regarded with suspicion by many, not in the least because they looked a bit language specific, but then, the earliest constraints on transformations were criticized for being construction specific.[2] But it is also true that *wh*-deletion now seems to stand out as a sore thumb. The situation was remedied one year later, however. In Chomsky (1982) the concept of 'empty operator', generally rendered as 'OP' or 'O', is introduced without any supporting discussion that I am aware of. Ever since, however, *wh*-deletion is out and empty operators are in.

The really interesting queston now is whether all problems are solved. They are not, of course. Clearly, we cannot leave the choice between empty operators and lexically realized *wh*-words free, much as we would perhaps like to. No matter how often we change the terminology, for example by talking about optional spell-out of operators, the problem of determining under what circumstances spell-out is obligatory, optional or blocked remains, to a large extent, to be solved.

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[2] I'll refrain from making the obvious remark about the status of constraints in Optimality Theory.

At this point we would expect the linguistic community to become active and to start working on solving the problem within the new (or, for the recalcitrant, even the old) framework. That, however, has not happened.[3] Why? My impression is that the main reason is to be found in the fact that the empty elements in question are, in a sense, elements from the lexicon. And hence the issue of spell-out is on a par with the issue of insertability of lexical items. The good old subcategorization frames. And hardly anybody has been giving them much of a thought lately. The lexicon was where language specific stuff needs to be stated anyway. And language specific stuff is boring and uninteresting. So we do not work on it.

There is a further side effect. In the absence of a theory about when and where zero elements are licensed, it is very easy to postulate their presence whenever it is convenient. To mention just one example, empty prepositions, which, it must be admitted, are likely candidates in view of their status as grammatical formatives and their concomitantly light semantics, are assumed to be responsible for the assignment of semantic cases in languages such as Finnish.[4] Take some noun phrase in the illative case. The idea then is that, since case is assumed to be assigned by some governing or selecting head, there has to be some such head that will assign the illative case. So let us assume that there is such a, presumably prepositional, head meaning 'into'. But actually, the demarcation between nominal and prepositional projections is far from sharp, precisely in this domain.[5] Why not assume that the illative morpheme IS the preposition (or, depending on ones views, postposition) which happens to be realized or spelled-out by a bound morpheme. On such an approach there is no empty element. And choosing this option is simply a matter of Ockham's razor, modulo other arguments, of course.

For a long time, I thought that similar considerations pertained to the issue of modal verbs when used with non-verbal complements, as in *vi vill upp i tornet* ('we want up in the tower', meaning we want to go up in(to) the tower).[6] The majority view, at least since Lightfoot (1979), has been that modal verbs were lexical verbs in Germanic, that they still were full lexical verbs in Old English as well as in the mainland Germanic languages, but that in English they became auxiliaries. This was my view as well until I discovered some evidence in Swiss German that has convinced me that modals have to be

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[3] A notable and commendable early exception is Platzack (1979). In present day linguistics, it is the work of Emonds that is pretty much unique in dealing with these matters (Emonds 2000, 2002).

[4] See Nikanne (1993) for the proposal and Huijbregts and Van Riemsdijk (2001) for discussion.

[5] See Van Riemsdijk (1998) for a discussion along these lines.

[6] The example (from Swedish) is from Platzack (1979:141).

analyzed as functional heads accompanying an empty (not phonetically realized) motional verb sharing most, though perhaps not all, properties with the equivalent of the verb *go*. One forceful piece of evidence comes from the existence of what I have called Right Edge Directionals in Swiss German (as well as in Alsatian, Luxemburgish and Afrikaans).[7] The following is an example:

(1) Si   händ wele   uf   de turm   uwə.
     they have wanted onto the tower up
     'They wanted <to go> up onto the tower.'

The problem with right edge directionals is that they normally cannot occur in extraposition, to the right of a verb cluster:

(2) *Si händ wele gaa (= 'go') uf de turm uwə.

And while Swiss German has Verb Projection Raising, making it possible to have dependents of some verb inside the verb cluster, such a dependent can never stand all the way at the end of the cluster. In fact, this is what it means to be an OV language: any dependent must be to the left of the verb that it is a dependent of. By postulating the presence in the verb cluster of an empty motion verb GAA, the possibility of Right Edge Directionals is explained: $[....AUX - M - PP_{DIR} - [e]_{GAA}]$.[8]

Interesting questions arise in connection with this case of an empty motion verb. It is clear, for example, that the empty GAA cannot be used in all contexts where the overt verb *gaa* can be used. To start with, GAA can only be used as a non-finite verb. Presumably this is so because an empty verb stem cannot host verbal inflection morphemes. Furthermore, some functional verb, generally a modal verb, must be in the verb cluster to serve as an identifier or licenser of the empty verb, as shown by (3), where capitals are used for zero elements.

(3) S isch besser, uf de turm   uwə { z   gaa / *z GAA / *Z GAA}.
     it is   better up the tower up   to go
     'It is better to go up on(to) the tower.'

These questions and their putative answers carry over to a set of more general questions about specified deletion (or specified ellipsis, or specified zero formatives) whose answers will ultimately constitute a theory of such elements. Let me conclude with a brief and partial list of such questions.

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[7] This argument was independently arrived at by J. Hoekstra (1997).

[8] This argument along with several others, is discussed in great detail in Van Riemsdijk (to appear).

What is the range of elements that can be represented by empty formatives? We already know, for example, that the set must include, but cannot be limited to, functional elements: the perfective auxiliary[9] in Swedish and Norwegian can be empty, for example, but so can the lexical verb GAA. Emonds (2000) holds that non-functional (that is, lexical) empty elements are limited to root contexts, but that proposal seems to be counterexemplified by the case of GAA.[10]

Some cases of ellipsis of the deletion under identity type seem to be straightforwardly reducible to instances of specified deletion of some anaphoric element, as in the case of N-bar ellipsis, which we may analyze as an empty pronominal element similar to *one*, licensed by a strong form of an adjacent functional element in the DP. But the question is whether all cases of deletion under identity can be handled along such lines. My present feeling is that most can except for a number of apparent deletion processes, typically found in coordinate conjoined constructions, that should be regarded as instances of 'shared structure'.[11] These would include Right Node Raising and Gapping.

What are the ingredients of Licensing Theory? In particular, what counts as a potential licenser and what are the conditions on the syntactic proximity between the licenser and the licensee? It would, in a sense, be nice if we could say that licensing must always involve a head-head relation (a functional head licensing an empty lexical head or vice-versa), but McShane (2000) lists some cases from Russian that seem to involve the surrounding subject and object only, as in *Èta vy [e] sardel'ku?* (PARTICLE you$_{NOM}$ [e] a-sausage$_{ACC}$ = 'Is that a sausage you are eating?'). But possibly these could be assimilated to a more contextually determined form of gapping. Considering the question of syntactic proximity next, it appears that both phonological and syntactic (hierarchical) adjacency are involved somehow. Further discussion would far exceed the limits of the present article, however.[12]

An interesting subquestion to the previous one is whether movement of the licenser and/or the licensee may affect the licensing relation. A quick survey of the cases I know about reveals the following picture:[13] movement of

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[9] See, among others, Den Besten (1989), which was originally circulated in 1977 and had previously appeared as Den Besten (1983), and Platzack (1986).

[10] Another relevant case is that of Nimboran (Inkelas 1993), a Papua New Guinea language with very rich position class morphology in which we find empty verb stems for such concepts as 'laugh', 'kiss', and even 'make cat's cradles'.

[11] See, among others, Goodall (1987), and Van Riemsdijk (2000, 2001), for more general discussion of the notion of shared structure.

[12] See Lobeck (1995), Van Riemsdijk (2002) and Breitbarth (2002) for relevant discussion.

[13] See Den Besten (1989), Van Riemsdijk (1989), Breitbarth (2002), and Van Riemsdijk (2002) respectively.

the licensee away from its licenser or licensing environment results in ungrammaticality (undeletability); example: Swedish *ha* after having undergone V2 cannot be empty — BLEEDING; movement of the licensee to a licenser may result in deletability; example: resumptive pronouns cliticized to C° in Swiss German relatives — FEEDING; movement of a licenser to a licensee may result in deletability; example: participle fronting in Serbo-Croatian may permit the auxiliary clitic to be empty — FEEDING; movement of a licenser away from the licensee does *not* result in ungrammaticality/undeletability; example: GO-licensing by a modal verb M that is fronted under V2 — NO BLEEDING.

In short: *the basic licensing relation is between (some link in) the Licenser Chain and the head of the Licensee Chain.*

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