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Quantitative perspectives on mismatches in ellipsis: Introduction to the special issue

Abstract: We provide a brief introduction to the special issue, sketch the main topics, and provide an overview of the contributions.

Keywords: ellipsis, mismatch, quantitative methods, experimental syntax, corpus linguistics

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1 Introduction

Ellipsis has been of particular interest to linguistic theory because it raises fundamental questions about the relationship between form and meaning. When a speaker produces an elliptical construction, interpretation depends on material that is not overtly realized but must be recovered by the hearer from the conversational context. Generally, such recovery proceeds without great effort. The clear difference between what is pronounced and what is understood has made ellipsis a rich source for investigating the architecture of grammar. In particular, the apparent ease with which meaning is recovered from absent material has shed light on the interaction between syntax, semantics, discourse, and language processing.

Debates on ellipsis have prominently featured two key questions concerning the nature of the representation at the ellipsis site. The first question concerns syntactic representations: does ellipsis involve unpronounced structure, or can interpretation proceed without positing silent material? Competing approaches to this question have provided structural and non-structural answers, offering different views on how the grammar relates form to meaning. The second question concerns the relationship between an ellipsis and its antecedent, and in particular, the extent to which formal identity or structural parallelism is required in ellipsis. Is strict formal identity with some overtly expressed antecedent required to license ellipsis? Or, alternatively, can the content of the ellipsis site diverge in form from its antecedent, and if so, to what degree? Addressing these issues has not only advanced our understanding of ellipsis itself but has also informed broader debates about grammatical representation and the mechanisms underlying language comprehension.

While theoretical analyses have yielded important insights, the empirical basis of these debates has changed considerably as research progressed. As with many linguistic phenomena, early work largely relied on introspective judgments for constructed examples. Introspection remains an indispensable tool for generating hypotheses to this day, but as ellipsis research progresses, researchers have complemented introspective evidence with corpus data and experimental methods. These quantitative procedures have often proven advantageous compared to exclusively introspective approaches, both in ellipsis research and in the study of grammar more generally. They did so by making an evaluation of theoretical predictions possible against broader and systematically collected datasets. As a consequence, robust generalizations may be distinguished from isolated observations, enabling a more precise evaluation of competing theoretical proposals.

One venue for advancing the empirical turn in ellipsis research has been the workshop series *Experimental and Corpus-Based Approaches to Ellipsis* (*ECBAE*), which has been held (semi-) annually since 2017 in varying locations across Europe and the US. The present issue contains a selection of papers presented at the sixth edition of *ECBAE*, which was hosted at the 21st

International Congress of Linguists in Poznań, Poland, in 2024. The contributions cover a range of elliptical structures on the clausal level (gapping, stripping, fragments, Right-Node Raising (RNR)) in a number of different European languages (French, Spanish, English, Early and Modern German). All contributions in this issue address one of the most persistent and central questions in ellipsis research: how much identity between an ellipsis and its antecedent is actually required, or, put differently, to what extent mismatches between the two are possible. Methodologically, each contribution provides a rich quantitative basis for the discussion of its respective phenomenon, drawing on analyses of (historical) corpora, judgment data, reading times, or production data obtained through, for example, sentence completion tasks.

Marianna Lohmann investigates gapping in Early New High German (ENHG, 1350–1650) by focusing on those omissions of finite verbs in which ENHG differs from Modern Standard German (MSG). In comparison to MSG, ENHG places weaker restrictions on antecedent–ellipsis identity. ENHG allows not only mismatches in person/number-marking akin to MSG, but also permits mismatches in grammatical function, voice, or the exact lexical choice of the auxiliary as in (1).

(1) *da ist er eine Zeitlang still gelegen/ vnnd ~~hat~~ sich mit seinem*
there is he a time.span still lain and has REFL with his
Kriegßvolck Erquicket/.
troops refreshed
'He rested there for a while and recovered himself together with his troops.'
(Baumbank.UP, Johann Bange 1599, s488)

Drawing on the Baumbank.UP treebank (Demske 2019), all instances of these types of mismatches in coordinated clauses are identified and analyzed. The corpus study shows that these mismatches occur most frequently in the late ENHG period and in Upper German texts, a development which is similar to the development of subordinate clauses lacking a finite verb, known as afinite constructions. However, following Lohmann (2026: Chapter 7), it is argued that mismatched ellipses as in (1) are genuine instances of coordination ellipses, especially gapping, and should be kept apart from afinite constructions. This analysis is underpinned by data from Yiddish and Old English, which permit similar mismatches in coordination. Finally, the loss of mismatched gapping in Modern High German is attributed to the subsequent process of standardization, which is supported by evidence from prescriptive grammars.

The contribution by **Emma Kious** and **Anne Abeillé** focuses on gender mismatches in French stripping with predicative adjectives and human nouns. Earlier claims for other languages (Merchant 2014; Sprouse et al. 2021) posit that the two parts of speech differ in their tolerance of mismatches, raising the expectation that French adjectives tolerate mismatches like in (2) more readily than nouns (e.g., *chanteur* 'singer-M' vs. *chanteuse* 'singer-F').

(2) *Elle était vieille, et lui aussi ~~était~~ ~~vieux~~.*
she be-PST.3SG old-F.SG and he too be-PST.3SG old-M.SG
'She was old, and him too.'

Combining evidence from several contemporary French corpora with three acceptability judgment experiments, the study systematically investigates the effects of predicate type, mismatch, constituent order, noun morphology, and gender stereotypes on the acceptability and distribution of stripping ellipsis. Corpus data reveal that gender mismatches are attested for both predicative adjectives and, against expectations, nouns. The experiments further confirm that such mismatches are generally acceptable, with ratings at least as high as comparable anaphoric constructions. These findings challenge analyses that derive French nominal ellipsis through deletion under strict morphological identity, instead suggesting either that grammatical gender in French role nouns behaves like an inflectional agreement feature that can be ignored under ellipsis, or that stripping is best analyzed within a direct interpretation framework without syntactic reconstruction.

Lisa Schäfer and **Ingo Reich** investigate verb ellipsis by RNR in German complement clauses. They focus on mismatches in morphological person and number features such as in (3).

(3) *dass ich den Zeitschriftenartikel ~~lese~~ und Jan das Buch liest*
that I the journal.article read.1SG and Jan the book read.3SG
'that I read the journal article and Jan reads the book.'

They compare divergent predictions made by existing analyses that range from strict phonological identity via weaker identity requirements all the way to unrestricted acceptance of mismatches. The competing predictions are examined in five experiments that combine detailed acceptability data with results from sentence production and comprehension tasks. The production data reveal a clear mismatch penalty: speakers become progressively less likely to produce RNR as the morphological difference between antecedent and ellipsis site increases. By contrast, acceptability remains high even with substantial person and number mismatches, where RNR yields comparable patterns to the gapping and full-clause baselines. The paper argues that although speakers avoid producing stronger mismatches in RNR, such mismatches are nevertheless grammatical. The findings thus challenge theories that require strict phonological identity, instead supporting analyses in which the grammar allows for person and number mismatches in RNR. More broadly, the study demonstrates that production and acceptability data can reveal complementary aspects of the constraints governing mismatches in ellipsis.

Joanna Nykiel investigates structural priming in elliptical versus non-elliptical responses to English adjunct questions, asking whether structural priming effects are equally robust in both types of responses. The investigated paradigm is shown in (4) for the preposition *at* in the temporal adjunct *at 5 o'clock*.

(4) A: *At what time do you close?* (Prepositional question)
A': *What time do you close?* (Non-prepositional question)
B: *(At) 5 o'clock.* (Fragment answer)
B': *We close (at) 5 o'clock.* (Full clause answer)

The paper analyzes 868 question-response pairs originally collected in an elicitation experiment by Chia et al. (2020). While structural priming effects emerge across the dataset as a whole, the effects disappear for fragment responses. Instead, fragments overwhelmingly favor the omission of the preposition *at* for both prepositional and non-prepositional antecedent questions, despite the resulting structural mismatch in the case of prepositional antecedents. The paper proposes a processing-based account revolving around the specific form of the temporal adjunct in the question-response pairs. It argues that the readily accessible lexical content of the adjunct (*5 o'clock*) makes its temporal function transparent, rendering the preposition redundant as a retrieval cue. The preference of preposition omission in fragment responses is therefore analyzed as the outcome of competing processing pressures, with cue redundancy overriding the impact of structural priming that is observed both in the full set of responses and in the set of fragment responses to non-prepositional questions.

The paper by **Max Bonke** concerns a special property of gapping in Spanish: in contrast to languages like English or German, Spanish allows complementizers in embedded gapping. This is illustrated for the complementizer *que* 'that' in (5).

(5) *El cree que el mundo es su empresa y que los mexicanos ~~son~~ sus lacayos.*
He thinks that the world is his company and that the Mexicans are his lackeys
'He thinks that the world is his company and that the Mexicans are his lackeys.'

The paper asks whether *que* in embedded gapping is constrained by pragmatic properties such as factivity, assertion, or at-issueness. Previous work (Bonke & Repp 2022) showed that the acceptability of *que* depends on the embedding verb: it is fully acceptable with verbs of saying and thinking but degraded with other types. Under the hypothesis that *que* contributes a distinct component to sentence meaning, the paper investigates whether its presence affects the interpretation of embedded gapping. A by-verb correlation analysis of acceptability and independently obtained interpretation data suggests that factivity plays no role. Two rating experiments reach similar conclusions: the first applies a factivity diagnostic to gapping with and without *que*, while the second employs exploratory diagnostics to target assertion, at-issueness, and reportiveness. Across all measures, *que* shows no meaningful effect on interpretation, suggesting that *que* in embedded gapping unlikely impacts factivity or related pragmatic notions. Instead, the complementizer likely contributes no independent meaning in this construction.

Taken together, the contributions in this special issue suggest that identity constraints on ellipsis are less rigid and more nuanced than some structural approaches have assumed. By integrating quantitative evidence ranging from diachronic corpora to multi-method experimental paradigms, they highlight two main avenues of current research. First, morphological and structural mismatches (such as in agreement, grammatical function, or argument structure) may be acceptable even when production routines or historical standardization processes penalize them. This suggests that identity restrictions often arise from flexible, discourse-driven interpretation mechanisms rather than strict constraints rooted in grammar. Second, the presence or absence of overt material (such as functional complementizers or redundant prepositions) is modulated by processing efficiency, discourse transparency, and register. These collective findings point toward a gradient, multi-factorial view of ellipsis, in which mismatches may be compatible with grammatical constraints, while processing, frequency, and discourse factors shape their usage and distribution. Methodologically, these studies demonstrate that dynamic quantitative approaches drawing on multiple methods are essential for capturing how form, meaning, and processing pressures interact in ellipsis.

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