

Agreement in discourse ellipses

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Both spontaneous spoken language and newspaper headlines display a high frequency of ellipsis. In particular, arguments in topicalized position are vulnerable to omission, but also finite verbs are elided in certain cases, as illustrated by the following examples:

1. Ø tjente rått på telefonhealing. (headline)
Ø earned plenty on telephone healing.
2. Husleien Ø dobltet. (headline)
The rent Ø doubled.
3. Ø tar ting som det kommer. (spoken data)
Ø take things as it comes.
4. Ø hadde blitt kaos her da. (spoken data)
Ø had become a chaos here then.
5. Har du gjort leksene dine? Ø gjorde jeg i går. (spoken data)
Have you done your homework? Ø did I yesterday.

I first discuss the recoverability conditions on the omission of elements in such ellipses. Elided elements can be recoverable either from the sentence internal context or sentence externally (McShane 2005). Secondly, I address this question: Is it plausible to assume a full sentence structure for these cases, as argued for in Nygård, Eide and Åfarli (2008)? And if it is, given that certain elements are not instantiated, what does the underlying sentence structure contain? More specifically, I discuss the presence of formal phi-features and how these features are valued through the operation Agree (Adger 2003).

To account for agreement facts in the ellipses, I suggest a separationist analysis (Harley and Noyer 1999), where formal phi-features are present in the syntax independently of lexical insertion. I further argue that in certain cases, phi-features can be valued from contextual information. Support for this view comes from elliptical examples where anaphors (6), verbs (7) and predicatives (8) show agreement with a null subject. Furthermore, examples displaying so called semantic agreement (9 and 10) point in the same direction. In such sentences, there seem to be a mismatch between the number features of the subject and the verb. It thus appears that the valuing of phi-features is dependent upon how the meaning of the subject element is conceived of.

6. Ø har valgt å ikke trene meg i hjel. (headline)
Ø have chosen to not exercise myself to death.
7. Ø suis tellement énervée que (ec) me suis assise sur la télécommande.
Ø am so nervous that me am seated on remote control.
'I am so nervous that I have just sat down on the remote control.'
(Haegeman& Ihsane 2001)
8. Slitne etter ferien, (headline)
Ø Ø Tired (3 pl) after the holiday.
9. Peter and Mary travel in Royal circles.
10. Politiet er snille.
The police (sg) are nice (pl).

The hypothesis adopted is that there are undefined feature matrixes linked to the syntactic positions. These matrixes are specified depending on what lexical items are inserted, or in certain cases, dependent of how these items are mentally construed. In the ellipses, this means that the relevant features are present independently of lexical insertion, and can be valued from information from the C-I interface.

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