

## Beyond MaxElide: A'-extraction from ellipsis sites

James Griffiths

University of Konstanz

**Synopsis.** *MaxElide (and reductions thereof) must be abandoned. The distribution of A'-extraction from ellipsis sites is governed by a semantic constraint on ellipsis licensing.*

**Background.** Deaccented syntactic phrases (*DeaccPs*) are domains that contain no focally prominent material. Ellipsis may target a phrase which is fully contained within DeaccP, as (1) illustrates (where small caps denotes focal prominence, italics denotes deaccentuation, and greyout denotes ellipsis).

(1) JOE thinks she'll fail the exam, and BILL [<sub>DeaccP</sub> *thinks she will* [fail the exam]], too.

If A'-extraction occurs from within the ellipsis site, unacceptability is observed if the A'-moved phrase is either contained in DeaccP or immediately dominates DeaccP, as (2) and (3) respectively show (Merchant 2001, 2008, Schuyler 2001).

(2) \*JOE knows who Sue kissed, but BILL DOESN'T [<sub>DeaccP</sub> *know who*<sub>1</sub> [she kissed *t*<sub>1</sub>]].

(3) \*Joe will KISS someone, but we don't know WHO<sub>1</sub> [<sub>DeaccP</sub> *he will* [kiss *t*<sub>1</sub>]].

Merchant (2008) observes that the ellipsis sites in utterances such as (2) and (3) are contained in larger candidate ellipses (in other words, acceptable utterances would be derived if DeaccP in 2 and 3 were themselves elided). This leads Merchant to conclude that (2) and (3) are unacceptable because higher ellipsis is available. This proposal is encapsulated in his *MaxElide* constraint:

(4) *MaxElide*: Let XP be an elided constituent containing an A'-trace. Let YP be a possible target for ellipsis. YP must not properly contain XP ( $XP \not\subseteq YP$ ). (Merchant 2008:141)

Phrased differently, *MaxElide* states that constructions that fit one of the schemata in (5) are ungrammatical. (In these schemata, underlining denotes that a phrase is available for ellipsis.) This analysis has proven highly influential, spawning many recent analyses that make reference to *MaxElide* or some theoretical reduction thereof (Takahashi & Fox 2005, Hartman 2011, Parker & Seely 2010, Messick & Thoms 2016, among many others).

(5) a. ... [<sub>DeaccP</sub> ... [YP ... *t*<sub>1</sub> ...] ...] ...  
b. ... [<sub>DeaccP</sub> ... [XP ... [YP ... *t*<sub>1</sub> ...] ...] ...] ...

**First aim.** I demonstrate that the assumption that DeaccP must be elidable, or must contain a phrase which is elidable, for unacceptability to arise in (2) and (3) is incorrect. I show that, for every unacceptable construction  $\alpha$  that fits one of the schemata in (5), there is another unacceptable construction  $\beta$  which differs from  $\alpha$  only insofar as no higher elidable phrases are available in  $\beta$  (cf. Messick 2015). To illustrate this, compare the utterances in (2) and (6). While both examples are unacceptable, ellipsis of DeaccP is only possible in (2).

(6) \*Joe KNOWS who Sue kissed, but he won't REVEAL [<sub>DeaccP</sub> *who*<sub>1</sub> [she kissed *t*<sub>1</sub>]].

This observation shows that analyses that make reference to *MaxElide* or some theoretical reduction thereof are therefore necessarily misguided. This means that researchers should not

view this dataset as the ‘MaxElide’ dataset, but instead as a dataset in which extraction from an elided domain (hereafter, EED) is sometimes prohibited (cf. Schuyler 2001).

**Second aim.** I provide a semantic analysis of the distribution of acceptability observed in the EED dataset. This analysis capitalises on the inability to define a tenable Predicate Abstraction rule (cf. Heim & Kratzer 1998) in Rooth’s (1985) *alternative semantics* framework (Shan 2004, Kotek 2016, *contra* Novel & Romero 2010). This inability entails that  $\lambda$ -expressions are interveners for focus percolation (see 7) and dictates that no focus semantic value can be returned for phrases whose ordinary semantic value requires one or more applications of Predicate Abstraction.

(7)  $\llbracket \dots \lambda x \dots x \dots \rrbracket^f = \text{undefined}$

Using a modified form of Rooth’s (1992) licensing condition on ellipsis, I propose that, unless the ellipsis site and its antecedent are semantically identical, ellipsis is only licensed if a focus semantic value can be defined for a phrase that includes both the ellipsis site and a focussed item. Because focus semantic values are calculated using alternative semantics, and because alternative semantics is incapable of returning a suitable denotation for phrases that include  $\lambda$ -expressions (due to the unavailability of a tenable Predicate Abstraction rule), this entails that a suitable focus semantic value cannot be defined for phrases that simultaneously include (i) a focussed item, (ii) a  $\lambda$ -expression, and (iii) an ellipsis site. I show in detail that precisely those EED constructions that are unacceptable fit this description. This analysis not only captures the simplex dataset in (1) to (3), but also the complex VP ellipsis dataset discovered by Schuyler (2001), in which the focal status of the A’-moved phrase affects acceptability (compare 8 & 9).

(8) \*I know he kissed a girl, but I don’t know [WHICH girl]<sub>1</sub> [he did [kiss t<sub>1</sub>]].

(9) I know which GIRL he kissed, but I don’t know [which BOY]<sub>1</sub> [he did [kiss t<sub>1</sub>]].

In addition, I also discuss how, when utilised alongside *vehicle change* (Fiengo & May 1994), the current analysis explains why sloppy readings are unattested in certain VP ellipsis constructions.

**Outcome.** Because MaxElide is an *ad hoc* rule, attempts to provide a theoretical reduction of it have abounded since Merchant (2008). If correct, my analysis shows that no theoretical reduction is required, as MaxElide does not provide an adequate description of the data it was invoked to explain, has no general utility, and should therefore be abandoned. This allows us to move beyond MaxElide and consider why variation in acceptability is observed in a broader dataset, namely EED constructions. My analysis attributes this variability to a general semantic constraint on recoverability under ellipsis, and, by capitalising on the inability to define a tenable Predicate Abstraction rule in the *alternative semantics* framework, also provides an argument against variable-free theories of semantics (*contra* Shan 2004).

**Selected references.** Merchant, J. 2008. Variable island repair under ellipsis. In: K. Johnson (ed.), *Topics in ellipsis*. CUP, 132-153. ■ Messick, T. 2015. Assessing the role of competition in MaxElide. *CLS* 49. ■ Schuyler, T. 2001. *Wh-Movement out of the site of VP ellipsis*. MA thesis, UCSC: California. ■ Shan, C. 2004. Binding alongside Hamblin alternatives calls for variable-free semantics. In R. Young (ed.), *SALT* 14, 289-304. ■ Rooth, M. 1992. Ellipsis redundancy & reduction redundancy. In S. Berman & A. Hestvik (eds.), *Proceedings of the Stuttgarter ellipsis workshop*.