

## **Notes on *Deletion Not Dependent on Linguistic Context***

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### **1. Opening Remarks**

The aim of this paper is to examine cases of deletion not dependent on linguistic context. Perlmutter (1971) claims that any sentence other than an imperative<sup>1</sup> in which there is an **S** that does not contain a subject in the surface structure is ungrammatical. Dillon (1978) counts elliptical sentences such as *^ Beg your pardon*<sup>2</sup> as grammatically incomplete (and hence as strictly *ungrammatical*). Such statements are, however, not without problems for reasons that will be given below.

We may take as our starting point the fact that in English there are a massive number of (non-imperative) sentences that may allow the subject or other dispensable (obligatory) elements (e.g., the operator)<sup>3</sup> to drop. Although the verb in English is the least dispensable element in independent clauses, ellipsis of the subject is not uncommon. While analysing the speech of any speaker, the presence or absence of a subject may be grammatically felicitous or not, and may be grammatically appropriate or not. Knowing only that someone has produced a sentence without a subject tells one nothing of interest unless one knows the context in which that sentence occurred. There are, in English, grammatical constraints on precisely when the subject or other dispensable elements can be deleted, without affecting the acceptability of the sentence.

In general, every independent clause requires a subject, because without a subject it is impossible to express the Mood<sup>4</sup>, at least in the usual fashion. The difference between declaratives and *yes/no* interrogatives is realized by the order of the elements *subject* and *operator*; and it is impossible to arrange two elements in order if one of them is not there. So, while *it* in *it's raining* and *there* in *There was a crash* do not represent any entity participating in the process of raining or of crashing, they are needed in order to distinguish these from *Is it raining?* and *Was there a crash?*

The dispensability of subjects may be related to Chafe's observation (1976) about subject roles; the subject slot is the likely place to direct attention when completing elliptical constructions like *^ Doesn't matter* and *^ Serves you right* because this role is assumed to remain stable. The ellipsis of subjects or other dispensable elements illustrates the complexity of interaction between cognition and syntactic conventions. The identity of the missing subject is beyond all doubt in the constructions given above; certainly the deleted subject is *it*. A procedural approach is concerned with discovering the conditions under which the ellipsis of subjects or other elements becomes frequent. (See Postal, 1976; Rizzi, 1986 and Thompson, 1973).

Lyons (1968) points out that sentences like *^ Looks like rain* and *^ Anything the matter?* are to be described directly by a deletion rule in the grammar, without the aid of context. Quirk et al. (1972) refer to initial absences in general as "Ellipsis not dependent on linguistic context" (p.544), to which Quirk et al. (1985) refer as "situational ellipsis" (p.895), e.g., *((Are) you) Hungry* and *(Do you) want something?* So, too, Allerton (1975) points out that initial word absences occur "where the situation gives redundancy" (p.222), implying situationally conditioned ellipsis in all cases. He cites examples like the following:

- [1] a. (I've) Got it.
- b. (As a) Matter of fact...
- c. ^ Doesn't look too good.

All the same, Thomas (1979) is not happy about attempts to describe initial absences in terms of deletion or on the basis of knowledge of a precise extralinguistic context. His claim is that the missing information in, for instance, ^ *See you later* is "automatically supplied through our knowledge of the language system without the aid of context" (p.46). He, therefore, points out that sentences like those given above are "elisions and not ellipses" (p.46).

## 2. Deleted Items

The sentence-initial ellipses discussed above and those that follow are sometimes dismissed as the phonologically conditional subaudibility of initial words before a tone unit. We may take the example ^ *Told you so* as the starting point for our discussion of deletion not dependent on linguistic context. This sequence is automatically interpreted as *I/we told you so*, and not *He/She/They told you so*. Even though *he*, *she* and *they* would precede the tone unit in the same way as *I* or *We* does, they would have to be manifested to be interpreted in any context, however redundant they may be. A sentence like ^ *Got the tickets?* is capable of combining with more than one subject and more than one tense element, e.g., *Have you got the tickets?*, *Has he got the tickets?*, *Have they got the tickets?* etc. A function like ^ *Get it?* might be expanded in one context to *Did you get it?* (e.g., *Did you get my telegram/the hat/the ticket, etc.?*), and in another to *Do you get it?* (i.e., *Do you get my meaning: Do you understand?*). In these cases of non-dependent ellipsis, "the more probable interpretation may be obvious from the situational context, though even then there may be indeterminacy" (Quirk et al., 1972: 545). So, too, the identity of the deleted subject in the following pair of sentences is beyond all doubt:

- [2] a. ^ Have an orange! (*imperative*)  
b. ^ Like an orange? (*interrogative*)

The listener will supply *you* as the subject and at the same time interpret the clause as an offer:

- [2] c. Will you have an orange?  
d. Would you like an orange?

There is rarely any misunderstanding, since the listener operates on the basic principle of all linguistic interaction -the principle that what the speaker says makes sense in the context in which he is saying it.

Now consider the following example:

- [3] ^ Want a drink?

This utterance may be treated as either a *yes/no* question in statement form (i.e., a declarative question) or a *yes/no* question in question form. In the former case, only the pronoun realizing the subject is said to be deleted (*You want a drink?*), in the latter, both the operator *do* and the second person pronoun *you* are deleted (*Do you want a drink?*).

A question that eventually arises is that which subject is to be understood if none is present? The regularity with regard to subject and tense absences, established by the conventions of language use, states that *subjectless statements* will generally receive an interpretation involving a first person subject, e.g., ^ *Haven't got the tickets*, *subjectless questions* will receive an interpretation involving a second person subject, e.g., ^ *Got the tickets?* and *tenseless sentences* will receive an interpretation involving the present tense, as in the latter example or ^ *Fancy a beer*, which has the interpretation *Do you fancy a beer?* Third person subject absences are generally only possible where there is intra-sentential evidence of a third person subject. For example, ^ *Looks intelligent* has the third person *-s* and, anyway, a first or second person subject would be, semantically speaking, highly unlikely. Third person absences give us cases of strict ellipsis (rather than of weak ellipsis, as is the case with the message ^ *Told you so*, for instance), since the question *who?* must now be answered by the context. Besides, various examples with modals occur with deleted third person subjects:

- [4] ^ Must/Might/Could/May be an accident up ahead.

Mention should also be made here of the fact that the elements *subject* and *operator* are associated with the realization of the structures *declaratives* and *yes/no* questions. However, the difference between the two structures can also be realized by another feature -that is, the intonation: declaratives usually go, normally, down in pitch at the end, while *yes/no* interrogatives typically go up. So it is possible to signal mood by intonation, which does not depend on the presence of a subject; and this makes it possible for a clause to occur without one. There is in fact one condition in which clauses in English systematically occur without subjects, one that depends on the notions of *giving* and *demanding*. For any clause, there is one choice of subject that is 'unmarked' -that is assumed, in the absence of evidence to the contrary. In a giving clause (an offer or statement), the unmarked subject is *I*; while in a demanding clause (a question or command), the unmarked subject is *you*. This means that, if a clause that on other grounds can be interpreted as an offer or a statement occurs without a subject, the listener will understand the subject *I* -that is, the subject equals the speaker, for example:

[5] A: ^ Carry your bag? (^ = *shall I*)                      B: Would you? Thanks.

[6] A: ^ Met Fred on the way here. (^ = *I*)                      B: Did you? Where?

If, on the other hand, it is a question or a command the listener will understand the subject *you* -that is the subject equals the listener, for instance:

[7] A: ^ Seen Fred? (^ = *Have you*)                      B: No, I haven't.

[8] A: ^ Give me that teapot!<sup>5</sup> (^ = *will you*)                      B: All right, I will.

Two points are worthy of note here. *First*, as the A-set in examples [5], [7] and [8] above shows, it is the whole of the mood element, i.e., the subject and the preposed auxiliary verb (which is finite and which acts like an operator) that is left implicit. In an information clause, however, only the subject is deleted; the element *tense* is present because it is

needed to express tense (present or past), as shown by the example [6], where *tense* is morphologically combined with the main verb *meet*. *Second*, in the A-set in [5], [7] and [8] above, the absence of the subject appears to be contingent on the absence of the auxiliary, in the sense that ellipsis of the subject is optional if the auxiliary has been deleted (as shown by the examples in [9] below)<sup>6</sup>, but it is impossible if the auxiliary is not deleted (as shown by the examples in [10] ):

- [9] a. ^ (I) carry your bag?  
b. ^ (You) seen Fred?  
c. ^ (You) give me that teapot?

- [10] a. \*Shall ^ carry your bag?  
b. \*Have ^ seen Fred?  
c. \*Will ^ give me that teapot?

It may further be noticed that ellipsis of the auxiliary does not appear to depend on the subject of the sentence. Thus, the examples in [11] below are acceptable:

- [11] a. ^ I look rather sad today?  
b. ^ You find Mary her hat?  
c. ^ They still live there?

In cases like those in [12] below only a second-person subject can be deleted; [12a] and [12c] below cannot be understood as equivalent to [11a] and [11c] above respectively:

- [12] a. ^ Look rather sad today?  
b. ^ Find Mary her hat?  
c. ^ Still live there?

In the following examples, however, the reflexive pronouns show that there is no restriction as to person:

[13] Cut { myself  
yourself  
himself  
ourselves  
yourselves  
themselves } again while shaving!

Also noteworthy is the regular absence of the subject alone or both the subject and the operator in cases like those in [14] below:

- [14] a. (This box/parcel) Contains fragile china/glass.  
 b. (This medicine/cream is) For external use only. (e.g., on a label on a skin cream)  
 c. (This medicine is) To be dispensed only by or on the prescription of a physician.

Consider, too, a tin with a label saying *mixed biscuits*; it would create a humorous effect of overkill to have instead *This tin contains mixed biscuits*.

Ellipsis of the operator (and subject) can combine with other ellipses, for example of a determiner:

- [15] a. ((It's) a) Shame that the rain spoiled our picnic.  
 b. (It's a) Pity he won't be back before I leave.  
 c. Why isn't she coming to the cinema with us tonight? (Is her) Car out of order?

In addition, there are several other situations in the day-to-day use of language where the use of non-elliptical expressions would be redundant, if not outright absurd, and where no linguistic context is necessary. Consider the following examples:

- [16] a. Smith's ^ is for sale. (*said to a person wishing to buy a house*)  
 b. I'd like six, please. (*said at a stall selling only eggs*)

In the examples [16a] and [16b] above, the speaker is using exophoric

ellipsis; it is the context of situation that presents the information needed to interpret this. But, exophoric ellipsis has no place in cohesion (see Halliday, 1985; cf. Thomas, 1979).

Determiners, operators and pronouns are commonly deleted in block language, e.g., in newspaper headlines, titles, notices, etc. They are also commonly deleted in personal letters, in familiar style, in notes (e.g., of lectures), in diaries and in telegrams. Such situations will elicit heavily elliptical texts that are nonetheless comprehensible. Thus:

- [17] a. (The) US (is) heading for (a) new slump (.)  
b. (The) Minister (is) Expected (to) Give (his) Decision Before  
(the) Debate (.)

Such ellipsis is limited, obviously enough, to written style, and contrasts with the situational ellipsis which is characteristic of familiar spoken English, such as calling by name, giving commands, making requests and exclaiming, to name a few. A parent who cries *No!* to a child in a moment of urgency relies on the child's knowledge of what *no* means, but beyond that, it is not linguistic knowledge that is involved, but rather on-the-spot imagination and perception of extra-linguistic context. The only thing there is for the child to understand is the particular situation.

It will be observed that several other types of situational ellipsis found only in familiar style in speech involve particular lexical items, e.g., an article, a preposition and a conjunction:

- [18] a. She didn't answer my letter. (The) Fact is she didn't even read it.  
b. (A) Friend of mine told me about it.  
c. (Of) Course I study hard.  
d. (As a) Matter of fact, I'm going there tomorrow.  
e. We thought (that) Chico was a fine player<sup>7</sup>.

What is also worth noting is that situational ellipsis is sometimes final. For example, an utterance like *How could you ^ ?* may be said as a rebuke to someone who has just committed some situationally known



folly. The elliptical gap here could be said to be equivalent to the expression *go swimming in this cold weather*, for instance.

### 3. Summary and Conclusion

In dealing with situational ellipsis, a distinction is to be made between the grammaticality of a sentence and the acceptability of an utterance (that is, the acceptability of a sentence uttered by a speaker in a context). Uttering sentences in a context would prevent people like Dillon (1978) from condemning natural language because of its *incompleteness*. Another point that is worth drawing attention to here is that it is difficult to assume that initial word absences categorically do not require a *linguistic* context for intelligibility or acceptability. In the case of second person subject and present tense absences, we would, of course, agree as they are not dependent on context at all. In the case of first and third person absences, however, the semantic-syntactic requirement of a subject has to be satisfied by the context, which may be linguistic. For example, an utterance like  $\wedge$  *Visited Madame Lee from Hong Kong yesterday* may be dependent on the adjacent linguistic context for its interpretation. We can treat the utterance as a sentence fragment given as a reply to *What did you do yesterday?*, where the gap ( $\wedge$ ) is equivalent to *I*. We have a similar state of affairs in *(The) same again* (request to somebody to serve the same drink as before), which may be regarded as a reply to *Are you ready to order, sir?* We may also observe two possible occurrences of the sentence *I wouldn't  $\wedge$  if I were you*, where the ellipsis in the main clause is final:

#### *linguistically conditioned*

[19] A: Shall I do the ironing?

B: I wouldn't  $\wedge$  if I were you. (where  $\wedge$  is equivalent to *do the ironing*)

#### *situationally conditioned*

[20] (*A is obviously about to do the ironing*)

B: I wouldn't  $\wedge$  if I were you.

So, too, cases like those in [21] and [22] below clearly show that the situational meaning, which is non-linguistics in its very nature, may sometimes be described in linguistic terms:

[21] A: How's Peter today?  
B: ^ Looks quite well, thank you.

[22] A: ^ Seen Peter?  
B: No; ^ must be away.

In both [21] and [22] above, the subject in the response is understood as *he* (=Peter) by presupposition from the preceding question [compare: *Why can't he get up? (Is he) too feeble?; (It's a) Lovely day, isn't it?*].

Finally, in examples like those in [23] below the missing information may be supplied from the tag question:

[23] a. ^ Had a good time, did you?  
b. ^ Didn't do too well, did I?  
c. ^ Lovely day, isn't it?

## Endnotes

1. In most accounts of English grammar the imperative is presented as if it were a special case, without any explanation. But it is not. It is simply an instance of this general principle by which a subject is understood.
2. The place where deletion occurs is marked by  $\wedge$ . However, we shall also, from time to time, follow the practice of showing optionally deleted items in parentheses.
3. *Operator* is a term used to refer to the first word in a verbal group that makes the group finite, e.g. *They will ask many questions*. Quirk et al. (1972 and 1985), among others, use the term *operator* to refer to the first auxiliary verb to occur in an auxiliary group, e.g. ‘He *will* (auxiliary 1, ‘operator’) *be* (auxiliary 2) coming (main verb)’. An operator, as the name implies, operates as the question-forming word, by moving to the initial position in the sentence in questions: *He has been typing all morning* versus *Has he been typing all morning?* In negative statements, the operator stands before *not*, e.g. *They will not ask many questions*. It should also be mentioned here that *be* and, sometimes in British English, *have* act like operators even when they are main verbs.
4. The element *subject*, which is a nominal group, and the element *operator*, which is part of the verb group, are closely linked to form one constituent which we call the *mood* element. Thus, in *This medicine may cure your cough* and *He is clever* the parts functioning as the mood are *this medicine may* and *he is* (cf. Halliday, 1970).
5. Note that *Give me that teapot!* could be interpreted as *(Will you) Give me that teapot?* With ellipsis of the mood element; compare: the tag *Give me that teapot, will you?*, where it is usual to retain it.
6. The auxiliaries which can be ellipited in this way are limited to *do*, *did*, *have* and *be*. Modals and past tense forms of *have* and *be* cannot be deleted. However, *will* can sometimes delete in statements, as in *Be back in a few minutes* (see Jenkins, 1972).
7. Quirk et al. (1985: 599), however, claim that in cases like [18e] above the ellipited items are structurally recoverable and that there is here, therefore, an instance of “structural ellipsis”.

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