

Simpler Syntax on **Ellipsis**

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Simpler Syntax

- In *Simpler Syntax* (Oxford, 2005), we explore the consequences of the Simpler Syntax Hypothesis for a range of syntactic constructions of natural language.

Simpler Syntax Hypothesis (SSH)

- **The most explanatory syntactic theory is one that imputes the minimum structure necessary to mediate between phonology and meaning.**

- *Simpler Syntax* shows how a large class of argument structure phenomena can be accommodated through use of a syntax-semantics interface somewhat richer than the homomorphism called for by **Interface Uniformity**, the commonly held assumption in mainstream syntactic theory that the syntax-semantics interface is maximally simple and maximally uniform.

The *Simpler Syntax* Challenge

What is the simplest account of a native speaker's knowledge of the form/meaning correspondence?

Ideally,

- such an account would get the facts right,
- and would rely only on general principles, e.g.,
 - that sentences have structure,
- and not special principles, e.g.
 - that sentences have elaborate invisible structure,
 - that invisible structures are subject to different constraints than overt structures.

Bare Argument Ellipsis

- (1) A: Harriet's been drinking scotch again.
B: No, bourbon.
B': Yeah, with Ozzie.

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The *Simpler Syntax* Challenge

- What is the minimal explanation of how a native speaker can assign an interpretation to B or B' on the basis of A?
- Does this explanation **require** that we build a complete invisible IP or CP around
 - *No bourbon (Harriet's been drinking t again).*
 - *Yeah, with Ozzie (Harriet's been drinking t again).*
- Can we do it without assuming invisible syntactic structure and get the facts right (and can we get facts right that **don't** follow if we assume invisible syntactic structure)?

Background

- The basic phenomena are well known:
 - The fragment is semantically and syntactically parasitic on the antecedent, if there is one.
 - E.g.,

German case

- (2) a. A: Wem folgt Hans?
who-DAT follows Hans
'Who is Hans following?'
- B: Dem Lehrer.
the-DAT teacher
'The teacher'
- b. A: Wen sucht Hans?
who-ACC seeks Hans?
'Who is Hans looking for?'
- B: Den Lehrer.
the-ACC teacher
'The teacher'

English preposition selection in oblique arguments

- (3) a. A: I hear Harriet has been flirting again.
B: i. Yeah, with Ozzie.
ii. *Yeah, Ozzie.
- b. A: John is very proud.
B: Yeah, of/*in his stamp collection.
[cf. *proud of/*in NP*]
- c. A: John has a lot of pride.
B: Yeah, in/*of his stamp collection.
[cf. *pride in/*of NP*]

What is responsible for the interpretations and the forms?

- Two basic possibilities:
 - (i) the fragment has a full syntactic structure
 - (ii) it does not, (but it refers back to the structure of the antecedent)

Syntactic account, with interpretation of empty structure

The responses have a full syntactic structure except that all the parts that correspond to repetitions of A's sentence are represented as empty categories.

The syntax-semantics interface supplies the interpretations of the empty categories through their correspondence with A's sentences.

E.g. Syntax: $[_{NP} e] [[_I e] [_{VP} [V e] [_{NP} scotch]]]$
 Semantics: 'Harriet's been drinking scotch'

Semantic/pragmatic account, with reference to the syntactic structure of the antecedent

The responses have just the syntactic structure present at the surface. The syntax-semantics interface supplies the rest of the details of the interpretation, relying on the structure of A's sentences.

E.g.: Syntax: [_{NP} scotch]

Semantics: 'Harriet's been drinking scotch'

Semantic/pragmatic reconstruction and indirect licensing

drink:

DRINK (AGENT: X, THEME: Y [LIQUID])
 DRINK (AGENT: X, <THEME: Y [BOOZE]>)

[_{VP} NP1 [V NP2]]

Harriet's been drinking **scotch** again. ~ **bourbon**

DRINK (AGENT: HARRIET, <THEME: \tilde{Y} [BOOZE]>)

DRINK (AGENT: HARRIET, THEME: SCOTCH)

flirt:

FLIRT (AGENT:X, THEME:Y)
FLIRT (AGENT:X, <THEME:Y>)
[_{VP} NP1 [V [PP with NP2]]]

Harriet was flirting.

~

Yeah, with Ozzie

FLIRT (AGENT:HARRIET, <THEME:Y>)

FLIRT (AGENT:HARRIET, THEME:Y)

FLIRT (AGENT:HARRIET, THEME:OZZIE)

- Syntactic accounts allow concatenated constituents in a response to be combined into a unified underlying structure, explaining licensing **directly**:

A: i. I hear Harriet's been drinking
 again.
 ii. Has Harriet been drinking again?

B: i. Yeah, probably scotch.

(from 'Harriet has **probably** been drinking **scotch**')

 ii. Yeah, scotch, I think.

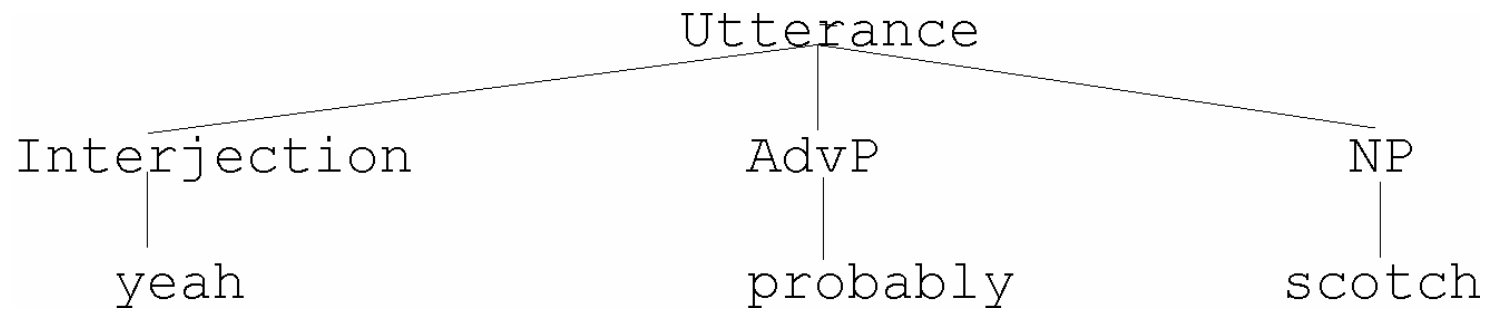
(from 'Harriet has been drinking **scotch, I think**')

 iii. Yeah, scotch this time.

(from 'Harriet has been drinking **scotch this time**')

Semantic/pragmatic

- The semantic/pragmatic account, by contrast, requires the theory to countenance these simply as non-sentential concatenations of phrases. So we have to assign the responses a structure like the following, in which more or less random constituents are concatenated.



Problems with the syntactic account

- The syntactic account encounters problems when the correspondence between the antecedent and the BAE interpretation is less than perfect.
 - the pronouns have to be adjusted: *you* substitutes for *I* and vice versa.
- A: What do you want to do?
- B: Eat.
- The force has to be adjusted: statements in response to questions and vice versa.

Problems (cont'd)

– Main clauses may have to be omitted, as in

A: I hear Harriet's been drinking again.

B: Yeah, scotch.

which means not 'I/You hear Harriet's been drinking scotch again,' but 'Harriet's been drinking scotch again'.

- The process is responsible for omitting ‘You hear’ from the interpretation of the response must be sensitive to factors of lexical semantics/ pragmatics:

Semantic/pragmatic conditions

- (4) a. A: Ozzie said that Harriet's been drinking again.
B: Yeah, scotch. [= 'Harriet's been drinking scotch (again)' or 'Ozzie said that Harriet's been drinking scotch (again)']
- b. A: Ozzie mistakenly believes that Harriet's been drinking again.
B: Yeah, scotch. [= 'O mistakenly believes that H has been drinking scotch again'];
≠ 'H has been drinking scotch again']
- c. A: Ozzie doubts that Harriet has been drinking again.
B: * Yeah, scotch.

- A's utterances in (4) are all syntactically parallel to (1). The felicity of different interpretations of B's response clearly depends not on syntax, but on details of the meaning of A's utterance.
- In other words, there are clear semantic/pragmatic conditions on the felicity of responses, and these are necessary even in the syntactic account.

Problems (cont'd (2))

- No sensitivity to islands, even though Bare Argument must move to A'-position (cf. Sluicing)

(5) A: This is a picture of Harriet drinking scotch.

B: No, bourbon_i (*, this is a picture of Harriet drinking t_i ; *No, it's bourbon that this is a picture of Harriet drinking t_i).

- (6) a. A: What kind of scotch does Harriet drink?`
B: Expensive. [= 'Harriet drinks expensive scotch']
[cf. **It is expensive that Harriet drinks [t scotch];*Expensive is the kind of scotch Harriet has been drinking]*
- b. A: Let's get a pizza.
B: Pepperoni?
[cf. **It is pepperoni that let's get [a t pizza];*Pepperoni is the kind of pizza that let's get]*
- c. Did Susan say that she saw PAT Smith?
-- No, KIM.
[cf. **Kim, Susan said that she saw [t Smith].]*
- d. Is that a Navy flight suit?
-- No, Army. [**Army, that is a [t flight suit].]*

- e. How many pounds does that pumpkin weigh?
-- Over a thousand. [**Over a thousand, that pumpkin weighs [t pounds].*]
- f. Is Sviatoslav pro-communist or anti-communist these days?
-- Pro. [**Pro, Sviatoslav is [t-communist] these days.*]

Dilbert Sluicing



Dilbert Sluicing



Dilbert Sluicing



Dilbert Sluicing: absolution



Problems (cont'd (3))

- Other cases arise in which the form of the antecedent and the form of the response are syntactically incompatible:

- (7) a. What did you do to Susan?
- Kiss her.
[*I kissed her to Susan. / *I kissed Susan to her.]
- b. What's that frog doing in my tomato sauce?
- Swimming.
[*That frog's doing swimming in my tomato sauce.]
[cf. What's that frog doing in my tomato sauce? - The backstroke.]

- (8) a. A: Why don't you fix me a drink?
B: In a minute, ok?
[cf. infelicity of *Why don't I fix you a drink in a minute* as response: response is understood as *I'll fix you a drink in a minute*]
- b. A: How about fixing me a drink?
B: In a minute, ok?
[response is understood as *I'll fix you a drink in a minute, ok?*]
- c. A: Let's get a pizza.
B: OK -- pepperoni?
[cf. **Let's get pepperoni pizza?*: response is understood as something like *OK, should we get pepperoni pizza?*]
- d. A: Let's get a pizza.
B: How about pepperoni?
[cf. **How about let's get pepperoni pizza?*]

Generalizations

- It is possible to assign a meaning to a fragment when there is no good syntactic antecedent for it in the discourse.
- The mechanism that assigns this meaning can function simply on the basis of the meanings under consideration and pragmatic knowledge.
- What can be focused – an interpretable fragment – does not appear to have a neat syntactic characterization (e.g. in terms of topicalization).

Summary

- The derivational account gets wrong what can be ellipted.
- Impossible syntactic derivations get saved only because they are phonetically null, not a very compelling explanation.
- The derivational account cannot deal with cases for which there is no syntactic antecedent.

- A *Simpler Syntax* account will avoid these problems.
- What needs to be done is
 - say exactly how the fragment is matched with the antecedent;
 - say how
 - the fragment is matched with the antecedent;
 - and licensed (indirectly) by the match;
 - explicate the pragmatic inferences;
 - get all the arrows right.
- Non-trivial, but, we believe, doable - it is what we humans do when we interpret an answer in context.