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Another problem for syntactic (and semantic) theories of VP-ellipsis

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A variety of data has been used to argue against theories of VP-ellipsis based on syntactic deletion or reconstruction (Fiengo and May 1994, inter alia), including voice alternations ((1)), nominalized antecedents ((2)), and split antecedents ((3)).

- (1) This problem was to have been looked into, but obviously nobody did.
(Vincent Della Pietra, p.c., cited in Kehler 2000)
- (2) Meanwhile, they sense a drop in visitors to the city. Those who do, they say, are taking cabs. (Chicago Tribune, courtesy Gregory Ward)
- (3) Mary wants to go to Spain and Fred wants to go to Peru, but because of limited resources, only one of them can. (Webber 1978)

This data has been used to argue instead for a semantic analysis (Dalrymple et al. 1991, Hardt 1992, Kehler 1993, inter alia). I add to this literature a previously unnoticed type of example that poses problems for both types of approach; consider (4) and (5).

- (4) Mary's boyfriend gave her his school picture, just as all schoolboys do.
- (5) A: Bob's mother cleans up after him all the time.
B: I'm surprised; most parents these days won't.

Informants agree that in addition to their strict readings, these examples have sloppy interpretations: (4) can mean that all schoolboys give *their girlfriends* their school pictures, and (5) can mean that most parents won't clean up after *their children*. The problem for a syntactic reconstruction approach is apparent, since there is no syntactic material available in the antecedent clause corresponding to "their girlfriends" in (4) nor "their children" in (5). Suitable material is likewise absent at the levels of logical representation assumed by semantic analyses.

Insight into what licenses the felicitous use of ellipsis in examples like (4) might be gotten by contrasting it with the variant in (6), which is highly marginal at best with a sloppy interpretation.

- (6) ??/* Mary's boyfriend gave her his school picture, and Bob did too.

Examples (4) and (6) differ in that the elided clause in (4) denotes a generalization of the antecedent clause whereas in (6) it does not. This suggests that in (4) a semantic representation of the missing material may be generated as part of the inference process that establishes the generalization relationship. These examples could thus add to a growing body of evidence

that inference and coherence establishment play crucial roles in determining when ellipsis is licensed (e.g., Kehler 2000).

References

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