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Contents

Foreword	1
Code and Inference: The Meaning of Words in Context <i>Robyn Carston</i>	3
Dependent on Context: <i>eigentlich</i> in adjectival and adverbial use <i>Regine Eckardt</i>	7
Adreflexive Intensification and the Theory of Focus and Information <i>Kjell Johan Sæbø</i>	13
A Lexical Perspective on Discourse Structure and Semantics <i>Bonnie Webber</i>	19
A model for sentence-fragment production <i>Shinji Ido</i>	25
A cross-linguistic investigation of the licensing and interpretation of implicit object arguments <i>Gergely Pethő & Eva Kardos</i>	29
The discourse function of right-dislocation in Catalan <i>Laia Mayol</i>	35
Investigating nominal coreference in originals and translations <i>Kerstin Kunz</i>	41
Cohesion and explicitation in an English-German translation corpus <i>Silvia Hansen Schirra, Stella Neumann & Erich Steiner</i>	45
Connectors in a cross-linguistic perspective <i>Henning Nølke</i>	51
Aspectual Influence on Temporal Relations. A Case Study of the Experiential <i>Guo</i> in Mandarin <i>Jiun-Shiung Wu</i>	55
Tense switch in Aspect/-Non-Aspect languages and its implications for information structure <i>Barbara Schmiedtová, Mary Carroll, Christiane v. Stutterheim & Natasha Sahonenko</i>	59
Making implicit information explicit: Kortmann's scale of informativeness and the English <i>V-ing</i> free adjuncts in Catalan translations <i>Anna Espunya</i>	63
Adverbial 'doch' and the notion of contrast <i>Elena Karagjosova</i>	69

Evidence for a Scalar Analysis of Result in SDRT from a Study of the French Temporal Connective <i>alors</i> <i>Myriam Bras, Anne Le Draoulec & Nicholas Asher</i>	75
Contrastive Lexical Pragmatics: A relevance-theoretic approach to lexical narrowing and broadening in English and Norwegian original texts and translations <i>Ingrid Lossius Falkum</i>	81
Explaining connections in Akan discourse: the role of discourse markers <i>Nana Aba Appiah Amfo</i>	85
The metarepresentational use of main clause phenomena in embedded clauses <i>Thorstein Fretheim</i>	89
Discourse Structure in Optimality Theoretic Pragmatics <i>Henk Zeevat</i>	95
Entailment, assertion, and textual coherence: a case study <i>Patrícia Matos Amaral</i>	99
The role of discourse topic and proximity for demonstratives in German and Russian <i>Maria Averintseva & Manfred Consten</i>	105
Some remarks on minimal sufficient conditions across languages <i>Richard Zuber</i>	111

A model for sentence-fragment production

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1. The issue

In various areas of study within the discipline of linguistics, sentence-fragments (including many of those that are referred to as elliptical sentences) are identified as ‘full sentences’ from which syntactic or grammatical constituents are omitted (see, e.g., Lyons (1977: 589), Brown and Miller (1991: 144-146), Napoli (1996: 200), Matthews (1997:111), Bavin (2000), Malmkjaer (2002: 543)). Accounts of sentence-fragment production where sentence-fragments (hereafter SFs) are identified as sentences with missing constituents are necessarily based on the assumption that every SF has a corresponding ‘full sentence’ into which native speakers can ‘reconstruct’ it with (near-)unanimous agreement. However, despite its popularity, one can find without much difficulty examples that contradict this assumption. For example, in as early as 1974, Gunter (1974: 12-13) devised the term ‘telegraphic ellipses’ to refer to SFs (‘elliptical sentences’ in his terminology) of which ‘informants do not agree ... on the proper expansion’ (ibid: 13). The existence of such SFs raises the question of whether it is reasonable to assume the existence of a ‘full sentence’ for every SF.

The present study is an attempt to account for SF production without assuming the existence of a ‘full sentence’ for every SF. Although this study is at a preliminary stage, the model for SF production that derives from it has the following three advantages over the popular ‘constituent-omission’ model explained above: 1) it accounts for the production of the sort of SFs that Gunter calls ‘telegraphic ellipses’, 2) it predicts what constituents have to be present in a given SF, and, perhaps more significantly, 3) it explains why in certain contexts pro-drop cannot occur in languages that have subject-verb agreement morphology. I describe below how this model, which I tentatively call the composite model, accounts for SF production.

2. The model

The principle on which the composite model is based is simple: ‘in informative communication, foci (which are, as will be explained below, morphemes in this model) and morphemes that are grammatically required to accompany them necessarily occur’. I present below a simple schematic representation of the model in which a Turkish dialogue taken from Enç (1986: 195) is used as an example. *fs* and *ms* in the following chart represent foci and morphemes that are grammatically required to accompany them, respectively.

Mary's utterance:

- (1) *Herkes Ali-'yle tanış-tı.*
 everyone Ali-COM meet-PAST.3SG
 'Everyone met Ali.'

Mary thinks that:

Everyone met Ali.

- (2) $\forall x \exists e(\text{Meeting}(e) \ \& \ \text{Past}(e) \ \& \ \text{Agent}(e,x) \ \& \ \text{Theme}(e,a))$

John wants to contradict Mary because:

John did not meet Ali.

- (3) $\neg \exists e(\text{Meeting}(e) \ \& \ \text{Past}(e) \ \& \ \text{Agent}(e,j) \ \& \ \text{Theme}(e,a))$

negative morpheme *-ma* (NEG)

1st person singular pronoun *ben* (I)

{*f*: *f* is a focus}

{*m*: *m* is a morpheme grammatically required to accompany *f*}

Sentence-fragment

ben

-ma

tanış-

-dı

-m

*ben*_f

*tanış-*_m

*-ma*_f

*-dı*_m

*-m*_m

John's response to (1):

- (4) ***Ben*** *tanış-ma-dı-m.*
I meet-NEG-PAST-1SG
 'I didn't.'

(Note that (4) is an SF which would, in the 'constituent-omission' model, be identified as the following 'full sentence' from which *Ali-'yle* has been omitted: *Ben Ali-'yle tanış-ma-dı-m.* (I Ali-COMITATIVE meet-NEGATIVE-PAST-1SG) 'I did not meet Ali'. Note also that the occurrence of the pronoun *ben* 'I' is obligatory in (4) despite the presence of the subject-verb agreement suffix *-m* (1SG) — ## *Tanışmadım* is awkward as a response to (1).)

At the time (1) is uttered, John's proposition (3) differs from (2) by having one connective and one individual constant, namely \neg and *j*, which map onto the negative morpheme *-ma* and the first person singular pronoun *ben*, respectively. These morphemes, which are called foci in this model, need to be present in (4) because the principle mentioned above calls for their occurrence. This accounts for the obligatory occurrence of the pronominal subject *ben* 'I', i.e. the non-occurrence of pro-drop, in (4). The other of the two foci, namely *-ma*, cannot occur in isolation and calls for the accompaniments of three morphemes, namely *tanış-*, *-dı*, and *-m*, the occurrence of which is also required by the principle. (See Ido (2003: 50-51) for a detailed explanation of why these morphemes specifically need to occur with *-ma*.) Thus the composite model determines which constituents must be present in John's response to (1).

In summary, the production of an SF is represented in the composite model as a process in which foci and their accompaniments are 'put together' rather than as a process where con-

stituents are omitted from a ‘full’ sentence. This model thus 1) explains SF production without assuming a ‘full sentence’ for every SF, 2) identifies constituents that must occur in an SF, and 3) explains why pro-drop cannot occur in certain contexts.

3. Cross-linguistic validity

The validity of the model is not limited to Turkish. For example, the Mongolian, Bukharan Tajik, and Japanese equivalents of (4) exhibit the same obligatory occurrence of a first person singular pronoun and a negative morpheme that is observed in Turkish (4). (The information structural property of each morpheme is shown in subscript.) All of these examples obey the principle stated in § 1: ‘foci (*fs*) and morphemes that are grammatically required to accompany them (*ms*) necessarily occur’.

Mary’s utterance:

- (1) *Herkes Ali’yle tanıştı.* (Turkish)
Bügd Jontoy uulzsan (biz dee). (Mongolian)
Hamma Ali kati šinos šud. (Bukharan Tajik)
Minna Arini atta (ne). (Japanese)
 ‘Everyone met Ali’.

John’s response to (1):

- | | | |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| (4) in Turkish | <i>ben_f</i> | <i>tanış_m-ma_f-dı_m-m_m</i> |
| | I | meet-NEG-PAST-1SG |
| (4) in Mongolian | <i>bi_f</i> | <i>uulz_m-aa_m-güy_f¹</i> |
| | I | meet-IMPERFECTIVE-NEG |
| (4) in Bukharan Tajik | <i>man_f</i> | <i>na_f-šud_m-am_m</i> |
| | I | NEG-became-1SG |
| (4) in Japanese | <i>watashi_f-wa_m</i> | <i>aw_m-ana_f-katta_m</i> |
| | I-TOPIC | meet-NEG-PAST |
| | | ‘I didn’t’ |

Note that the first person singular pronoun has to occur in (4) in all of these languages, regardless of whether they utilize subject-verb agreement morphology.

4. Summary

The composite model comprises three mappings, namely the mapping of parts of a proposition onto morphemes, which are then identified as *fs* (mapping 1), the mapping between *fs*

¹ The meaning of this sentence is closer to ‘I haven’t met Ali’ than it is to ‘I didn’t meet Ali’, the Mongolian translation of which is not used here because of the modality of regretfulness that it encodes.

and *ms* (mapping 2), and the mapping of *fs* and *ms* onto a linear line of time (mapping 3)². The point at which this model departs most radically from the constituent-omission model is the role of syntax in SF production. In the constituent-omission model, meaning is mapped onto a syntactic structure, following which ellipsis takes place within that structure (see analyses in Merchant (2004)). On the other hand, in the composite model, mappings 1 and 2 restrict the role of syntax in SF production to often simple linear alignment of *fs* and *ms*. This order in which the three mappings are executed means that *fs* and *ms* can often be aligned without an elaborate syntactic structure.³ This model thus postulates that there may not always be ‘syntactically full’ sentences in SF production.⁴

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² Mapping 3, which is not discussed in the present paper, is omitted from the chart in § 1. (3) in fact yields three sets of morphemes, namely the sets of *fs*, *ms*, and *ns*. Mapping 3 linearly aligns *fs*, *ms*, and *ns* in accordance with syntax and/or morphology. {*n*: *n* is a morpheme whose occurrence or non-occurrence does not alter the proposition expressed by *fs* and *ms*} will be explained in detail in a follow-up paper. Unlike *fs*, *ms* are not constant across varieties and dialects and are susceptible to the differences between, say, the grammar of the informal style and that of the formal style — in general, the grammar of the formal style requires more morphemes to accompany *fs*, turning morphemes that would be *ns* in other styles into *ms*. A ‘full’ sentence often consists of *fs*, *ms*, and *ns*, whereas a ‘fragment’ often consists only of *fs* with or without *ms*. The following may serve as an example of such a ‘fragment’ in English: *Good short-term, bad long-term* (a fifteen-year-old Australian’s response to *you have a good memory!*).

³ In some cases, linear alignment of *fs* and *ms* does not call for the involvement of any syntax. For example, in the following utterance that appears in a Japanese interview transcription: *-na-i*. (-NEG-NONPAST), which is the interviewee’s answer to ... *zutto ita wake de wa nai?* ‘... so you weren’t there all the time?’ (<http://www.hotexpress.co.jp/interview/kyoko/> (2005/09/16)), the order in which *-na* and *-i* occur can be determined by the simple rule of ‘the negative suffix precedes the tense suffix’.

⁴ For example, the ungrammaticality of (b) in the following example, which Merchant (2004: 676-705) claims to be ‘expected under the ellipsis analysis, since the distribution of case morphology on DPs will be regulated by the same mechanism in both elliptical and non-elliptical contexts’ (Ibid.: 679), is also expected under the present analysis, not because (b) is elliptical but because, while *Yongsu* is an *f*, *-rul* is neither an *f* nor an *m* nor an *n*. This analysis is also consistent with the fact that (c), which consists of one *f*, is an acceptable answer to the question.

Korean	Q:	<i>Nu-ka</i>	<i>ku</i>	<i>chaek-ul</i>	<i>sa-ss-ni?</i>
		who-NOM	this	book-ACC	bought
		‘Who bought this book?’			
	a. A:	<i>Yongsu-ka.</i>			
		Yongsu-NOM			
	b. A:	* <i>Yongsu-rul</i>			
		Yongsu-ACC			
	c. A:	<i>Yongsu.</i>			
		Yongsu			

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