

ELLIPSIS

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Ellipsis is the nonexpression of some lexical material – specifically, a word or words forming a syntactic constituent – that is needed for the full interpretation of a sentence but is not expressed because it can be recovered from the linguistic or real-world context. Under a traditional syntactic definition of ellipsis, elliptical gaps must be able to be filled with overt material, thus distinguishing them from other types of gaps, like traces of moved constituents. All natural languages permit ellipsis, but they differ with respect to which constituents can be elided in which configurations. Ellipsis falls within the larger field of reference resolution.

Most studies of ellipsis concentrate on formalizing the **licensing** and **recoverability** conditions for elided constituents. The former must account for what makes ellipsis grammatical in given configurations whereas the latter concerns the ways in which the meaning of the elided material can be understood from the context. When the meaning of an elided constituent is understood by coreference with a previously introduced linguistic constituent, that constituent is called the **antecedent**.

A cross-linguistic sampling of the many types of constituents that are subject to ellipsis includes arguments of a verb (1); head nouns in noun phrases with an overt quantifier, modifier, and so on (in [2], “laps”); main verbs in so-called gapping constructions (in [2], “swam”); verb phrases selected by an overt auxiliary (3); and main verbs in sentences containing two or more overt arguments or adjuncts (4). The elided categories in the examples are indicated by [ε]. Textual antecedents, when present, are shown in boldface.

1. [ε] Pomožeš' mne? [Russian; the subject is elided]

[ε] Help 2.SG.FUTURE meDATIVE

Will you help me?

2. Jack **swam**_i 20 **laps**_j and Beth [ε]_i 25 [ε]_j.

3. Greg is almost finished **swimming** but Bruce has just started [ε].

4. Kuda ty [ε]? [Russian; the main verb is elided]

whereDIRECTIONAL youNOM

Where are you going?

Although ellipsis is generally defined syntactically, syntactic approaches to the study of ellipsis (e.g., Lobeck 1995) are, by necessity, partial because ellipsis decisions can be affected by nonsyntactic factors like the semantics of the utterance, the potential for ambiguity, the physical context of the speech situation, and so on (McShane 2005).

Certain types of ellipsis, like gapping, either require or are promoted by syntactic and/or semantic parallelism.

Ellipsis is particularly challenging for natural language processing (NLP) systems since parsers (see **parsing, machine**) must be able to detect the virtual presence of elided constituents, and language generators must be supplied with rules of ellipsis usage that go beyond the relatively broad generalizations found in theoretical treatments.

Marjorie J. McShane