

Verb Phrase Ellipsis in Moroccan Arabic: A Semantic Review

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Abstract: Verb phrase (VP) ellipsis constitutes a central mechanism of implicit communication in discourse, enabling speakers to omit linguistic material that remains recoverable from context. The interpretation of VP ellipsis has traditionally been explained through form-based accounts that assume structural identity between antecedent and ellipsis site. However, such approaches encounter difficulties when addressing context-sensitive interpretations and cases of sloppy identity. In this review article, a meaning-based account of VP ellipsis is examined within a discourse-model framework. Semantic representations of verb phrases are treated as antecedents in a manner comparable to pronominal anaphora. Particular attention is devoted to evidence drawn from Moroccan Arabic, where context-dependent interpretations challenge purely syntactic identity approaches. The review demonstrates that VP ellipsis resolution relies heavily on semantic inference, discourse salience, and contextual interpretation rather than strict structural copying. The findings support a broader semantic and inferential perspective on ellipsis interpretation.

Keywords: Verb Phrase Ellipsis; Moroccan Arabic; Semantic Interpretation; Discourse Analysis; Anaphora Resolution.

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Introduction

Human discourse frequently depends on implicit meaning, as not all linguistic elements are overtly expressed in communication. One important mechanism enabling such economy is VP ellipsis, in which a verb phrase is omitted while remaining recoverable from context. The interpretation of these constructions requires both the identification of an antecedent and the reconstruction of omitted content.

Research on VP ellipsis has historically concentrated on reconstruction processes, with many studies assuming a form-based identity relation between antecedent and ellipsis site. Nevertheless, these approaches encounter significant limitations when dealing with context-sensitive interpretations and flexible referential patterns. Consequently, increasing attention has been directed toward meaning-based accounts that emphasize semantic interpretation and discourse inference.

Within this perspective, semantic representations stored in discourse are assumed to guide ellipsis resolution in ways comparable to anaphoric reference. Evidence from Moroccan Arabic further challenges purely syntactic approaches by illustrating that interpretation often depends on contextual

inference rather than structural identity. The present review examines major theoretical accounts of VP ellipsis and evaluates the extent to which semantic approaches provide a more comprehensive explanation of ellipsis resolution.

Background to the Study

VP ellipsis has commonly been described as a structure in which the same predicate is assigned to two different subjects. Most traditional approaches have therefore assumed that an identity relation must hold between antecedent and target (Hankamer & Sag, 1984; Fiengo & May, 1994). The principal theoretical issue has concerned the representational level at which this identity relation should be established.

Existing accounts have generally defined identity in terms of formal properties of the antecedent. However, alternative perspectives have suggested that meaning, rather than syntactic form, constitutes the crucial factor in VP ellipsis interpretation (Sag, 1976; Williams, 1977; Fiengo & May, 1994). One of the major challenges facing identity-based accounts is the phenomenon of *sloppy identity*, whereby a pronoun may shift its referent between antecedent and target interpretations.

In the analyses proposed by Sag and Williams, sloppy identity is associated with the distinction between bound-variable and free-variable pronouns. Under this view, sloppy interpretations become available only when pronouns function as bound variables. However, attempts to define bound-variable relations through syntactic configurations such as c-command have remained controversial (Chomsky, 1981; Hestvik, 1991).

Additional complications arise in examples involving cascaded ellipsis, where a single pronoun appears to require simultaneous bound and free interpretations. In response to this problem, Dalrymple, Shieber, and Pereira (1991) proposed a backward-looking matching mechanism. Within this account, the bound/free distinction no longer originates in the antecedent itself but instead emerges during the interpretive matching process.

Alternative approaches have also been proposed. Fiengo and May introduced an additional dependent/independent distinction in order to preserve the syntactic nature of bound-variable relations. Similarly, Priist and colleagues developed a notion of structural parallelism explicitly grounded in syntactic configurations, particularly in cases involving quantifier binding.

Across these approaches, the form of the antecedent remains central to reconstruction. Various supplementary mechanisms have therefore been introduced in response to problematic counterexamples, including bound/free distinctions, dependent/independent relations, structural parallelism, and matching procedures. Nevertheless, numerous cases continue to resist explanation within these frameworks. Meaning-based approaches consequently offer an alternative perspective capable of accounting for such phenomena without relying on increasingly complex formal distinctions.

Theoretical Problem of Ellipsis

The concept of ellipsis has historically been applied to a broad range of linguistic phenomena, extending from any situation involving apparently missing words (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) to more narrowly defined grammatical constructions. Ellipsis continues to occupy a central position in linguistic theory because it exposes limitations in conventional form–meaning correspondences. In non-elliptical structures, linguistic interpretation generally depends upon mappings between sounds, syntactic structures, and meanings. Ellipsis, however, presents cases in which meaning persists despite the absence of overt form. As a result, ellipsis challenges traditional assumptions regarding the relationship between syntax and semantics (Chomsky, 1965; Jackendoff, 1972).

Among the most extensively studied forms of ellipsis are VP ellipsis and sluicing. Both phenomena typically require an antecedent subject to some degree of discourse parallelism. Debates concerning the nature of this parallelism have dominated generative approaches to ellipsis over several decades. Competing theories have explored semantic, syntactic, and discourse-based explanations for antecedent recovery. Because ellipsis resolution often relies on abstract syntactic and semantic representations rather than surface structures, these constructions play an important role in broader ontological debates within linguistics. If ellipsis interpretation requires access to particular kinds of representations, then linguistic theory must account for the existence of such representations within models of linguistic competence (Kamp, 1980; Heim, 1981).

A Semantic Account of VP Ellipsis

Semantic approaches to VP ellipsis have proposed that interpretation should be modeled through discourse representations rather than strict formal identity. Within discourse-model frameworks, VP meanings are introduced into discourse memory and later retrieved to resolve elliptical structures. Under this approach, full verb phrases function analogously to indefinite noun phrases by introducing semantic objects into discourse. Elliptical verb phrases, by contrast, resemble pronouns because their interpretation depends upon selecting an appropriate antecedent from discourse memory. The discourse model therefore contains two principal sets: a set of salient entities (SE) and a set of salient predicates (SP).

Lexical verbs are assumed to introduce semantic representations of VP meanings into the discourse model. Crucially, antecedent VPs are represented as semantic assumption–sense pairs, allowing dependencies on discourse context to be maintained. Such representations enable context-sensitive elements, including pronouns, to receive different interpretations across antecedent and target structures.

For example, a VP such as *help him* may contain an object position whose interpretation depends upon discourse context. Consequently, antecedent and elliptical copies of the same VP may allow the pronoun to refer to different discourse entities. This flexibility poses challenges for strictly syntactic identity accounts while supporting semantic approaches based on contextual interpretation.

Locating Discourse Entities

The interpretation of pronominal and elliptical structures requires mechanisms for identifying salient discourse entities. This issue, often referred to as the *entity location problem*, has been addressed through multiple theoretical perspectives.

In Government and Binding theory, configurational constraints on coreference have received considerable attention. Computational approaches have additionally emphasized the importance of recency, salience, and discourse prominence in antecedent selection. The centering framework represents one influential attempt to model such factors computationally.

Within semantic accounts, entity-location mechanisms typically involve the application of three filters: a syntactic filter, a salience filter, and a selectional-restrictions filter.

Syntactic Filter

The syntactic filter eliminates entities that violate binding constraints. Standard formulations include Principle A, requiring reflexives and reciprocals to be locally bound; Principle B, requiring pronominals to remain locally free; and Principle C, requiring names to remain globally free. Feature compatibility, including number and gender agreement, is also enforced within this stage.

Salience Filter

The salience filter relies upon the assumption that discourse entities are ordered according to relative prominence. Factors such as syntactic prominence, recency, and pronoun/full noun phrase distinctions contribute to this ordering. Centering approaches additionally favor continuity by maintaining the same discourse center whenever possible.

Selectional Restrictions Filter

The final filter excludes semantically inappropriate antecedents according to selectional restrictions. Statistical co-occurrence patterns have frequently been employed to approximate such restrictions computationally. For instance, in the sentence:

The company's statement said it was studying its options.

Both *company* and *statement* appear as potential antecedents for *it*. However, semantic compatibility favors *company* because *statement* does not plausibly function as the subject of *studying*. Such constraints therefore contribute significantly to antecedent resolution.

Inference and VP Ellipsis

Research on VP ellipsis has demonstrated that antecedents need not always be explicitly stated in syntax. Webber (1991) observed that certain elliptical predicates are recoverable through contextual inference rather than direct syntactic realization. Consider the example:

Martha and Irv wanted to dance together; but Martha couldn't, because her husband was there.

In this case, the antecedent predicate is inferred from contextual information rather than directly expressed. Semantic approaches therefore propose that salient predicate sets should be partially closed under inference relations.

Nevertheless, unrestricted inferencing would overgenerate possible antecedents. Constraints must consequently be imposed upon the inferential processes governing antecedent recovery. Similar inferential mechanisms are also relevant for pronouns and definite descriptions, both of which may refer to inferable discourse entities.

Combined Predicates and Discourse Interpretation

Certain cases of VP ellipsis involve antecedents constructed through combinations of multiple salient predicates. Such phenomena suggest that discourse interpretation may operate over complex semantic representations rather than isolated syntactic structures.

Plural entities can likewise emerge through combinations of salient discourse referents. For example:

Tom and Sally were married last week.

They had a big wedding.

Here, the plural pronoun *they* refers to a combined discourse entity derived from two individual referents. Comparable combining operations may also apply to salient predicates and propositions in VP ellipsis interpretation.

The constraints governing these combinatory processes remain insufficiently understood and continue to represent an important area for future research.

Moroccan Arabic and VP Ellipsis

Evidence from Moroccan Arabic provides important support for semantic approaches to VP ellipsis. Context-sensitive interpretations in Moroccan Arabic frequently demonstrate that antecedent recovery depends less upon structural identity than upon discourse accessibility and inferential interpretation.

Pronouns embedded within elliptical structures may receive distinct contextual interpretations despite apparent formal similarity between antecedent and target structures. Such patterns challenge theories based exclusively on syntactic copying and instead reinforce discourse-oriented accounts grounded in semantic representation.

Moroccan Arabic therefore offers valuable empirical evidence for broader theories of ellipsis resolution that emphasize meaning, salience, and contextual inference.

Conclusion

Ellipsis remains one of the most theoretically significant phenomena in linguistic research because it directly concerns the relationship between linguistic form and meaning. Traditional approaches have frequently assumed that elliptical structures must maintain structural uniformity with their antecedents. Consequently, much theoretical work has focused on identifying formal identity conditions governing ellipsis resolution.

However, numerous empirical challenges—including sloppy identity, cascaded ellipsis, inferable predicates, and context-sensitive interpretations—have exposed limitations in purely syntactic accounts. Semantic and discourse-based approaches provide a more flexible framework by treating VP antecedents as discourse representations subject to inference, salience, and contextual interpretation.

Evidence from Moroccan Arabic further supports the view that VP ellipsis resolution cannot be adequately explained through structural copying alone. Instead, interpretation appears to rely upon semantic reconstruction within dynamic discourse models. Future research may therefore benefit from integrating semantic, inferential, and computational perspectives in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of ellipsis phenomena.

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