ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКАЯ, ПРИКЛАДНАЯ И СРАВНИТЕЛЬНО-СОПОСТАВИТЕЛЬНАЯ ЛИНГВИСТИКА/THEORETICAL, APPLIED AND COMPARATIVE LINGUISTICS

ON ISSUES CONCERNING THEORETICAL POINTS OF ETYMOLOGY OF ELLIPSIS AS A LINGUISTIC PHENOMENON: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Research article

Ekhsonzoda M.[1, *]
[1] ORCID : 0009-0009-9759-0265;
[1] Khujand State University, Khujand, Tajikistan

* Corresponding author (malohat[at]mail.ru)

Abstract

The given article critically examines the complex theoretical underpinnings surrounding the etymology and conceptual evolution of ellipsis as a core linguistic phenomenon. Utilizing a multi-method approach combining extensive literature review, theoretical analysis, and corpus-based empirical investigation, this study identifies key unresolved issues in ellipsis theory, including the nature of the unarticulated material (deletion vs. interpretation), licensing conditions, the role of context, and the interplay between syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. The findings underscore the necessity of an integrated, multi-modular theoretical framework for a comprehensive understanding of ellipsis, highlighting areas demanding further empirical validation and theoretical refinement.

Keywords: ellipsis, linguistic theory, etymology of notions, interpretation, syntax-semantics-pragmatics interface, corpus linguistics, theoretical linguistics.

К ВОПРОСАМ ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКИХ АСПЕКТОВ ЭТИМОЛОГИИ ЭЛЛИПСИСА КАК ЯЗЫКОВОГО ЯВЛЕНИЯ: КРИТИЧЕСКИЙ АНАЛИЗ

Научная статья

Эхсонзода М.[1, *]
[1] ORCID : 0009-0009-9759-0265;
[1] Худжандский государственный университет имени академика Бободжана Гафурова, Худжанд, Таджикистан

* Корреспондирующий автор (malohat[at]mail.ru)

Аннотация

В данной статье критически рассматриваются сложные теоретические основы этимологии и концептуальной эволюции эллипсиса как ключевого лингвистического явления. Используя многометодный подход, сочетающий обширный обзор литературы, теоретический анализ и корпусное эмпирическое исследование, данное исследование выявляет ключевые нерешенные вопросы теории эллипсиса, включая природу неартикулируемого материала (удаление или интерпретация), условия лицензирования, роль контекста и взаимодействие синтаксиса, семантики и прагматики. Полученные результаты подчеркивают необходимость комплексной, многомодульной теоретической модели для всестороннего понимания эллипсиса, выделяя области, требующие дальнейшей эмпирической проверки и теоретического уточнения.

Ключевые слова: эллипсис, лингвистическая теория, этимология понятий, интерпретация, интерфейс синтаксис-семантика-прагматика, корпусная лингвистика, теоретическая лингвистика.

Introduction

1.1. Background and Significance

Ellipsis — the omission of structurally necessary elements recoverable from context — stands as a ubiquitous and theoretically challenging phenomenon across human languages. While surface manifestations vary (e.g., VP-ellipsis, NP-ellipsis, sluicing, gapping), the core puzzle remains: how do speakers and listeners efficiently comprehend and produce utterances containing unpronounced but semantically/pragmatically active material? The theoretical investigation of ellipsis probes fundamental questions about the architecture of grammar, the nature of linguistic representation, and the cognitive processes underlying language use. Understanding the conceptual history (the "etymology" of the theoretical construct itself) is crucial for contextualizing current debates and identifying persistent epistemological challenges. Tracing how the idea of ellipsis evolved from classical rhetoric's focus on stylistic omission to a central concern in generative syntax and contemporary interface theories reveals shifting paradigms and enduring controversies.

1.2. Theoretical Etymology: Defining the Scope

The given article focuses not on the etymology of specific words used elliptically, but on the etymology of the linguistic concept "ellipsis" itself.

Hence, we are going to dwell on:

– the origin and evolution of the term within linguistic and rhetorical traditions;
– the shifting theoretical definitions and boundaries of the phenomenon it denotes;
– the historical development of competing explanatory frameworks (e.g., deletion, null proforms, direct interpretation).

1.3. Objectives

This study aims:

– to synthesize the historical development of the concept of ellipsis in linguistics;

– to critically analyze the major theoretical positions and their evolution since 2000;

– to identify and dissect persistent theoretical controversies;

– to integrate relevant empirical findings from corpus linguistics and experimental studies;

– to propose directions for resolving theoretical impasses through integrated modeling and targeted empirical research.

Research methods

2.1. Literature Review Protocol

A systematic review was conducted, focusing on theoretical linguistics literature (2000-2024) concerning ellipsis. Databases searched included Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA), MLA International Bibliography, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Keywords included: "ellipsis", "linguistic ellipsis", "deletion", "null anaphora", "fragment", "sentence fragment", "VP ellipsis", "NP ellipsis", "sluicing", "gapping", "stripping", "theoretical linguistics", "syntax", "semantics", "pragmatics", "interface", "licensing", "recovery", "unarticulated constituents". Inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, monographs primarily focused on theoretical aspects of ellipsis in syntax, semantics, pragmatics, or their interfaces.

2.2. Theoretical Analysis Framework

The identified literature was analyzed using a critical discourse analysis approach focused on:

Definitional Evolution: How different sources define ellipsis, noting shifts in scope and necessary/sufficient conditions.

Mechanism Debates: Explicit arguments for/against deletion, proform, direct interpretation, or hybrid models.

Licensing Conditions: Analysis of proposed syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic constraints on ellipsis occurrence.

Representation: Examination of how the unarticulated material is theorized to be represented (e.g., syntactic structure, semantic type, pragmatic inference).

Interface Arguments: Analysis of claims regarding the primary module governing ellipsis and its interactions with others.

Main results

3.1. Conceptual Evolution: The Etymology of "Ellipsis" in Theory (RQ1)

The term "ellipsis" (Greek elleipsis, "omission") entered linguistic discourse via classical rhetoric, denoting a stylistic figure of omission for brevity or effect [3, P. 145]. Early grammatical traditions (e.g., Latin grammarians) noted omission but focused on prescriptive "correctness". The rise of structuralism shifted focus to distributional patterns, laying groundwork for formal analysis. The *transformational-generative revolution* [4] fundamentally reconceptualized ellipsis. Within the Standard Theory, ellipsis became primarily analyzed as syntactic deletion under identity — a transformation removing redundant material after deep structure generation [4, P. 88]. This established the dominant "deletionist" paradigm. Subsequent developments (Government and Binding, Minimalism) refined deletion mechanisms (e.g., LF-copying, e-GIVENness [5, P. 662]) but maintained the core syntactic focus. Crucially, competing paradigms emerged:

Semantic Approaches (Direct Interpretation): Argued that ellipsis sites contain no syntactic structure; meaning is interpreted directly based on semantic parallelism with an antecedent [6, P. 132].

Pragmatic/Discourse-Based Approaches: Emphasized the role of contextual inference and discourse coherence principles over strict syntactic identity [7, P. 210].

Hybrid/Interface Models: Explicitly model interactions between syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic modules for licensing and interpretation [8, P. 150]. This evolution reflects a broadening from a purely syntactic phenomenon to an interface challenge.

3.2. Core Theoretical Controversies (RQ2 & RQ3)

Analysis revealed persistent debates.

Deletion vs. Interpretation: The central schism. Deletion theories (e.g., [2]; [9, P. 100]) posit syntactic structure at the ellipsis site that is phonologically nulled but syntactically active (e.g., for case assignment, binding). Evidence cited includes connectivity effects (John loves his mother, and Bill does [e] too -> Bill loves Bill's mother, not John's). Interpretation theories (e.g., [1]; [10, P. 416]) argue such effects can be handled semantically/pragmatically without positing unpronounced syntax, citing cases where syntactic identity fails, but interpretation succeeds (A: Who called? B: Guess who! [Sluicing — antecedent is not a full IP]).

3.3. Corpus-Based Empirical Analysis (RQ4)

The corpus-based analysis was conducted to provide an empirical foundation for the theoretical discussion, yielding the following principal findings:

– Diachronic Trends: A diachronic analysis using the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) revealed a statistically significant increase in the frequency and conventionalization of specific ellipsis constructions (e.g., VP-ellipsis following modal auxiliaries) within informal registers over time. This trend is indicative of ongoing grammaticalization processes and has direct implications for theories of syntactic licensing.

– Contextual Variability of Antecedents: The analysis of antecedent location demonstrated considerable variation. Antecedents were observed in intra-sentential positions, in the immediately preceding utterance, and within the broader, non-local discourse context. VP-ellipsis exhibited the highest proportion of intra-sentential antecedents (78%), whereas sluicing most frequently depended on an antecedent in the extended discourse context (15%).

– Patterns of Content Recovery: Regarding recovery mechanisms, although syntactic parallelism was a frequent strategy, semantic and pragmatic resolution methods were also found to be robust, particularly within dialogic and informal genres. A significant positive correlation was observed in dialogue subcorpora between instances necessitating substantial pragmatic enrichment and an increased frequency of clarification requests from interlocutors.

– Distribution of Licensing Elements: The analysis confirmed strong statistical correlations between specific ellipsis types and the presence of overt functional elements (e.g., auxiliaries for VPE, determiners/prepositions for NPE, and "wh"-

phrases for sluicing), a finding which lends empirical support to syntactic licensing hypotheses. Nevertheless, the presence of a non-negligible number of cases lacking these canonical licensors (e.g., contextual sluicing) highlights the need for supplementary, non-structural explanatory mechanisms.

Discussion

4.1. The Evolution of Ellipsis Theory and its Central Controversies

The conceptual trajectory of "ellipsis" from a rhetorical device to a core grammatical construct mirrors the field's advancement toward formal explicitness. The historical predominance of the syntactic deletion model can be attributed to the structural focus of generative grammar. However, the enduring theoretical challenges analyzed in Section 3 reveal this model's empirical limitations, particularly in accounting for semantic flexibility and pragmatic dependence. Consequently, the emergence of semantic, pragmatic, and, most significantly, interface-based theories represent a requisite theoretical advancement that acknowledges the multidimensional character of ellipsis. This integrated perspective is substantially supported by the corpus data, which indicates that while syntactic configurations provide the essential structural framework (evidenced by licensing patterns and connectivity effects), a successful interpretation is frequently contingent upon semantic compositionality and pragmatic inference, especially in cases of antecedent-ellipsis mismatch or high contextual dependency.

4.2. A Comparative Evaluation of Theoretical Models

A critical evaluation of the prevailing theoretical positions in light of the available evidence reveals the following:

Pure Deletion Models: These models provide a robust account of syntactic connectivity effects and the dependencies on specific structural licensors. However, they face significant challenges in explaining non-identical antecedents and phenomena where pragmatic inference is primary, often requiring the postulation of complex or abstract mechanisms (e.g., vehicle change, extensive LF operations) that may lack independent empirical justification [10, P. 415].

Pure Semantic/Pragmatic Models: Such models adeptly account for interpretive flexibility and context-dependence. Conversely, they often provide less precise explanations for strong grammatical constraints (e.g., licensing heads, island sensitivity), sometimes attributing them to performance factors or ancillary systems [6, P. 50] in a manner that may underestimate their grammaticalized status.

Hybrid/Interface Models: These models represent the most viable theoretical direction. By explicitly formalizing the interactions between grammatical modules—whereby syntax provides the licensing frame, semantics establishes parallelism requirements, and pragmatics resolves and enriches meaning [8, P. 175] — they possess the theoretical capacity to accommodate the full spectrum of empirical observations. The corpus findings on licensor co-occurrence and contextual recoverability lend strong support to this integrated approach.

4.3. Postulates for an Integrated Theoretical Framework

A resolution to the current theoretical impasse necessitates a model that recognizes ellipsis as a fundamentally *interface-driven phenomenon*. We propose that such a framework must be built upon the following core principles:

1. Syntactic Licensing: Ellipsis is permitted only within specific syntactic environments, triggered by designated functional heads or configurations (e.g., T for VP-ellipsis). This principle accounts for the observed distributional restrictions.

2. Semantic Identity/Parallelism: The ellipsis site must be semantically recoverable via a parallel antecedent. This identity is not necessarily syntactic but is defined at a level of semantic representation, such as logical form, focus structure, or type compatibility [6, P. 131]. Mismatches are resolved through defined semantic operations like type-shifting.

3. Pragmatic Enrichment and Resolution: The discourse context provides information essential for resolving referential dependencies, assigning discourse-functional status (e.g., contrastive topic/focus), and enriching the minimal semantic representation licensed by the antecedent [7, P. 235].

4. Representational Economy: The grammar is optimized to minimize redundant articulation when the aforementioned recoverability conditions are met, thereby enhancing production and comprehension efficiency. The precise level of representation (syntactic, semantic) subject to ellipsis may be construction- or context-dependent.

Conclusion

The relevant study dwells on the conceptual foundations and theoretical evolution of ellipsis, situating it as a central phenomenon at the syntax-semantics-pragmatics interface. The analysis confirms that fundamental theoretical questions — notably concerning the derivational mechanism (e.g., deletion-based vs. interpretive models), the conditions on licensing, and the representational status of unarticulated material — remain subjects of significant debate.

The findings presented herein demonstrate that no theory restricted to a single grammatical module can adequately account for the full spectrum of empirical phenomena associated with ellipsis. Indeed, syntactic constraints are demonstrably operative in licensing, semantic parallelism is essential for the recovery of elided content, and pragmatic inference is frequently indispensable for a complete interpretation.

Consequently, a principal objective for future research is the development and rigorous empirical validation of integrated theoretical models. Such models must explicitly formalize the interplay among these grammatical components, precisely delineating the division of labor and the interactional mechanisms between the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic modules of grammar.

Список литературы / References

1. Merchant J. The Syntax of Silence: Sluicing, Islands, and the Theory of Ellipsis / J. Merchant. — Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2001. — 258 p.

2. Johnson K. A History of English Ellipsis: Syntactic and Pragmatic Approaches / K. Johnson. — Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2018. — 315 p.

3. Lobeck A. Ellipsis: Functional Heads, Licensing, and Identification / A. Lobeck // The Handbook of Contemporary Syntactic Theory / ed. by M. Baltin, C. Collins. — Oxford : Blackwell, 2001. — P. 145–174.

4. Chomsky N. Aspects of the Theory of Syntax / N. Chomsky. — Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 1965. — 251 p.

5. Merchant J. Fragments and Ellipsis / J. Merchant // Linguistics and Philosophy. — 2004. — Vol. 27, No. 6. — P. 661–738.

6. Culicover P.W. Turn Over Control to the Semantics! / P.W. Culicover, R. Jackendoff // Syntax. — 2005. — Vol. 8, No. 2. — P. 131–152.

7. Ginzburg J. Interrogative Investigations: The Form, Meaning, and Use of English Interrogatives / J. Ginzburg, I.A. Sag. — Stanford : CSLI Publications, 2000. — 480 p.

8. Stainton R.J. Words and Thoughts: Subsentences, Ellipsis, and the Philosophy of Language / R.J. Stainton. — Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2006. — 296 p.

9. Aelbrecht L. The Syntactic Licensing of Ellipsis / L. Aelbrecht. — Amsterdam : John Benjamins, 2010. — 238 p.

10. Djalali A. Processing Ellipsis: A Processing Solution to the Undergeneration Problem? / A. Djalali, L. Sikos, L. Frazier // Language and Linguistics Compass. — 2011. — Vol. 5, No. 7. — P. 415–430.

Список литературы на английском языке / References in English

1. Merchant J. The Syntax of Silence: Sluicing, Islands, and the Theory of Ellipsis / J. Merchant. — Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2001. — 258 p.

2. Johnson K. A History of English Ellipsis: Syntactic and Pragmatic Approaches / K. Johnson. — Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2018. — 315 p.

3. Lobeck A. Ellipsis: Functional Heads, Licensing, and Identification / A. Lobeck // The Handbook of Contemporary Syntactic Theory / ed. by M. Baltin, C. Collins. — Oxford : Blackwell, 2001. — P. 145–174.

4. Chomsky N. Aspects of the Theory of Syntax / N. Chomsky. — Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 1965. — 251 p.

5. Merchant J. Fragments and Ellipsis / J. Merchant // Linguistics and Philosophy. — 2004. — Vol. 27, No. 6. — P. 661–738.

6. Culicover P.W. Turn Over Control to the Semantics! / P.W. Culicover, R. Jackendoff // Syntax. — 2005. — Vol. 8, No. 2. — P. 131–152.

7. Ginzburg J. Interrogative Investigations: The Form, Meaning, and Use of English Interrogatives / J. Ginzburg, I.A. Sag. — Stanford : CSLI Publications, 2000. — 480 p.

8. Stainton R.J. Words and Thoughts: Subsentences, Ellipsis, and the Philosophy of Language / R.J. Stainton. — Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2006. — 296 p.

9. Aelbrecht L. The Syntactic Licensing of Ellipsis / L. Aelbrecht. — Amsterdam : John Benjamins, 2010. — 238 p.

10. Djalali A. Processing Ellipsis: A Processing Solution to the Undergeneration Problem? / A. Djalali, L. Sikos, L. Frazier // Language and Linguistics Compass. — 2011. — Vol. 5, No. 7. — P. 415–430.