Weir 2014, chapter 4: Fragments and the syntax of clausal ellipsis

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Overview

- Weir argues that Merchant (2004) is essentially correct in his hypothesis that fragment answers are derived by movement followed by ellipsis.

- However, Weir also identifies several potential problems for this analysis. I'll talk about the following:

    i. NPI fragments can often be licit (despite Merchant's claim).

    ii. Bare quantifiers don't front, but can be fragments.

    iii. Particles don't front, but can be fragments.

    iv. Moved predicates show different scope properties than fragment predicates.

- Each of these suggests that the consituent in question does not move. They behave as though they remain *in situ*.

    > As Weir (2014:170): 'if the movement analysis of fragments is to have any hope at all, we need to in some way loosen the constraints on focus movement to the left periphery'.

- Weir comes up with an intriguing solution: Fragments move at PF.

    - Fragments are focii.
    - Assuming that focii must receive a certain phonological intonation at PF, they must not be deleted.
    - Assuming that ellipsis must occur, focii may move, as a last-resort option, out of the ellipsis site at PF.

- This leads inevitably back to the discussion of movement out of islands, as a source of confirmation for the hypothesis.

- Weir actually claims, *contra* Merchant, that fragments can violate islands, but only when certain criteria are met.

    > This leads to an intriguing (if difficult) discussion about whether ellipsis can ameliorate islands.

Today:

1. Problems for movement in fragments

2. Exceptional PF movement

3. Islands

4. Some of my questions

1   Some issues for Merchant's (2004) analysis

- Weir begins by discussing some *prima facie* problems for the movement analysis.

- The emerging pattern is that various sorts of fragments behave as though they remain *in situ* – *i.e.*, as though they have not moved to the left periphery.

- This is a problem for the move-and-delete approach. If fragments involve left-peripheral movement, they should act like they moved.

> Remember, we're trying to avoid non-constituent deletion.

1.1   NPIs and fronting

- Merchant (2004:691) notes that NPIs do not front in English and claims this is why they can't be fragment answers.

   (1)   a.   Max didn't read anything.
          b.   *Anything, Max didn't read.

   (2)   a.   What didn't Max read?
          b.   *Anything.

- Weir points out that the fronting of the relevant sort is not generally available in English, however. It's not normally possible to front answers to questions:

   (3)   What did you eat?
          a.   Chips.
          b.   *Chips, I ate.

> The movement in (1b) and (3b) is topicalization. Answers are focii, and focus movement is only possible in certain cases (Prince 1981).

- Furthermore, there are apparently acceptable cases of NPI fragments:

   (4)   a.   Which files shouldn't I delete?
          b.   Any of them!

> See den Dikken et al. 2000; Valmala 2007.

- Simplifying a bit, Weir proposes that the reason (2) is not acceptable is due to the fact that the question presupposes that Max ate something. Saying he didn't eat anything is therefore a contradiction.

- The real problem is that NPIs must be c-commanded by their licensing elements on the surface:

   (5)   a.   The soda, he didn't drink.
          b.   *Any of the soda, he didn't drink.

- Thus, the problem is how it is possible for an NPI to occur without being in the domain of its licensor.

1.2   Bare quantifiers

- Bare quantifiers resist fronting:

    (6)   ??Everyone they interviewed *t*.

    (7)   a.   Who did they interview?

           b.   Everyone.

- In fact, they don't even like appearing as the pivots of clefts (a focus structure):

    (8)   ??It was everyone that they interviewed.

- Again, if they do not front, there must be some explanation for the relative acceptability of bare quantifiers as fragments.

Weir notes that only contrastive topics front in English (outside of putative ellipsis contexts and that perhaps bare quantifiers make bad contrastive topics.

1.3   Particles

- Particles (or intransitive prepositions) do not generally front.

    (9)   a.   He breathed oxygen *in*.

           b.   He turned the TV *on*.

    (10)   a.   *In* he breathed the oxygen.

           b.   *On* he turned the TV.

    (11)   a.   *It was *in* that he breathed the oxygen.

           b.   *It was *on* that he turned the TV.

- However, they make licit fragments:

    (12)   a.   Do the aliens breathe xenon in? – No, out.

           b.   Did he turn the TV on? – No, off.

Weir discusses a couple more examples (pp. 174–175). I chose the ones that sounded worst to me, but I suspect there is a lot of variation in acceptability here.

1.4   Predicate fragments

- Inverse scope is bled under predicate fronting:

    (13)   John refused to teach every student.   (refuse > every, every > refuse)

    (14)   …and teach every student, he refused to.   (refuse > every, *every > refuse)

- However, predicate fragments allow both scopes:

    (15)   What did John refuse to do? – Teach every student.

                                        (refuse > every, every > refuse)

- If movement derives (15), inverse scope should not be possible.

Weir mentions in a footnote that while this is his judgment, others do not allow the inverse scope reading.

1.5   Summary

- The following are problems for the movement analysis:

    - NPIs can be fragments, though they are generally immobile.

    - Bare quantifiers can be fragments, though they don't like to move.

    - Particles can be fragments, though they do not move.

    - Predicate fronting bleeds inverse scope, but predicate fragments allow inverse scope.

- But we are still faced with the significant evidence from Merchant 2004 that movement is part of the derivation of fragments.

2   Fragments move at PF

- Weir proposes the following generalizations:

    (16)   If a string cannot be targeted by a phrasal movement operation even in principle, it cannot appear as a fragment.

    (17)   If a constituent is generally capable of movement, but is CONTEXTUALLY PREVENTED from moving in a given structure by dint of a structural configuration, it cannot appear as a fragment.

    (18)   For certain INTERPRETIVE purposes, fragments behave as if they are in their base position.

    > Here, 'in principle' means that the architecture of the grammar does not allow the string to be displaced (cross–linguistically).
    >
    > For example, being the complement of a P in non–P-stranding languages.

- Generalizations (16) and (17) are arguments in favor of a movement analysis.

- Generalization (18) suggests that fragments do not move.

2.1   Consider NPIs

- NPIs must be in a certain semantic environment, and this must hold on the surface.

- One way of understanding this is that every copy of an NPI must must be in the correct environment. That does not hold of (19b) below:

    (19)   a.   John didn't eat any of the beans.

    b.   ??Any of the beans, John didn't eat.

- On a single-output model of syntax, we would have to stipulate that the higher copy of a fragment (*i.e.*, the NPI) is not interpreted at LF, though other things (like *wh*-words), can be.

    > See Fox 1999.

- Note that it would need to be said that these moved fragments can fail to be interpreted (i.e. would obligatorily reconstruct) *just in case they move for ellipsis-related reasons*. But it's not clear how ellipsis could feed obligatory reconstruction in this way.
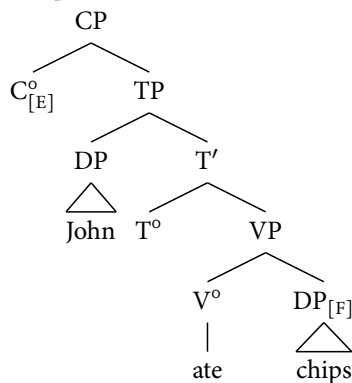
2.2 Exceptional PF movement

- Instead, Weir assumes the more traditional Y-model. And assume that there is movement there.

    – Weir follows Sauerland and Elbourne (2002) in assuming that the the movement operations which are available along each branch are fundamentally the same operations which are available at narrow syntax.

    – That is, the set of things which movement operates over remains the same (syntactic constituents not, *e.g.*, linearly continuous substrings).

    – On this view, any movement at PF will not (and cannot) be interpreted at LF.

- This structure undergoes no further changes on the LF branch.

- But the derivation continues on the PF branch. Weir proposes that the [F]-marked DP – the eventual fragment – moves.

    This proposal builds on Yoshida et al. (2014).

    – The [E]-feature instructs PF not to realize the material in its TP complement.

    – Part of that material (the DP *chips*) bears the [F]-feature. The phonological interpretation of this feature is pitch accent and stress.

    – Stressing the DP is at odds with deleting the DP. PF allows last-resort movement of the DP to a position outside the ellipsis site – SpecCP, the specifier of the head bearing the [E]-feature.

(20) a. *At Spell Out, LF*:   b. *At PF*:
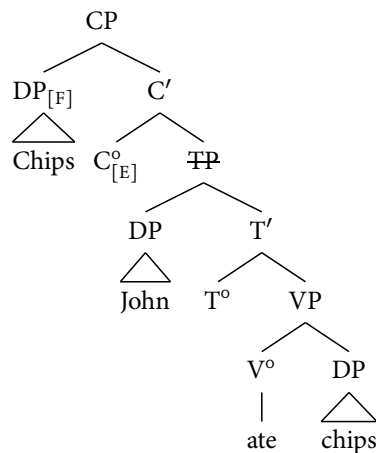
- Because there is no movement on the LF branch, the material behaves interpretively as though it is *in situ*.

- Weir stresses this is syntactic movement, with all the properties of such movement (*e.g.*, pied piping, no left branch extractions).

- However, it is not feature-driven; rather, it is driven by the need to reconcile the need to delete TP with the need to stressed focus-marked material.

Weir notes (pp. 191–192) that this implies that the inability of particles and bare quantifiers to move without ellipsis must be an LF issue, since the fact they are licit fragments requires that they be able to move in principle.

- This is why the movement occurs only with ellipsis. It arises out of a PF conflict created by ellipsis, and movement resolves the conflict.

There is an interesting discussion here about economy and why focused material does not simply block ellipsis (pp. 194–199). I encourage you to take a look at it.

3   Islands

- A nice confirmation of this approach would be to show that fragments are sensitive to islands. Merchant (2004) does this.

3.1   Sluicing *vs.* fragments

- A polar question can be interpreted as an implicit constituent question if a rising intonation is placed on the constituent being questioned (marked with a ↗).

(21) a.   Does Abby speak ↗[Greek] fluently?
      b.   No, Albanian.

- If such a rise is placed on a constituent in an island, a fragment answer is illicit.

(22) a.   Does Abby speak the same Balkan language that ↗[Ben] speaks?
      b.   *No, Charlie.

- This is, *prima facie*, what is predicted on a move-and-delete approach. Movement out of an island should not be possible.

- The issue is that sluicing (*wh*-movement + clausal ellipsis) famously appears to 'repair' island violations.

Ross 1969

(23)   Abby speaks the same Balkan language that someone (in this room) speaks, but I'm not sure who ~~she speaks the same Balkan language that~~ ~~*t* speaks~~.

- Merchant (2004) proposes an account of this based on the version of the PF theory of islands in Merchant 2008.

Merchant 2008 is where MaxElide is first discussed in detail.

3.2   Island insensitivity

- Weir claims that under the right circumstances, fragments actually can violate putative islands, similar to sluicing.

- For example, a register of English used in quiz shows seems to allow fragment answers originating in islands:

Stainton 2006

(24) *Quiz show register* in situ *question*:

      a.   Abby speaks the same Balkan language that which other member of her family speaks?
      b.   Ben.

- Indefinite correlates also appear to allow fragments:

  (25) a. Abby speaks the same Balkan language that someone (in this room) speaks.
        b. (Yes,) Ben.

- Even the implied question technique from Merchant (2004) yields grammatical examples:

  (26) a. Do they grant scholarships to students that study ↗ [Spanish]?
        b. No, French.

3.3 Alternative sources

- A recent tack has been the idea that alternative (non-isomorphic) antecedents are available for clausal ellipsis (sometimes called ISLAND EVASION).

  See, *e.g.*, Barros et al. 2015.

- Elided clefts are the main candidate:

  Alternative (island–free) antecedents are sometimes called *short sources*. For clefts specifically, see Merchant 2001:115–127 on *pseudosluicing*.

  (27) a. Abby speaks the same Balkan language that someone (in this room) speaks.
        b. (Yes,) Ben ~~it is~~.

- Weir approaches this possibility with great caution, since it has the potential to undermine our understanding of what is actually inside of an ellipsis site.

- As such, he takes no position on whether ellipsis can amnesty island violations.

- He draws a distinction between domains out of which movement is impossible (islands) and structural configurations that block a specific constituent from moving (frozen constituents).

  It is possible to have a configuration where there is no island and yet a particular constituent is frozen in place.

- For instance, PPs are not islands in P-stranding languages: It is possible to move out of PPs in languages that do not permit P-stranding. Adjuncts, however, are islands.

  See Abels 2003.

- Nobody has ever suggested that P-stranding can be ameliorated by ellipsis.

  If it could, we would have no basis for the P–stranding generalization.

- Importantly, *ellipsis does not have the general power to render all ungrammatical movements grammatical*.

- However, this does not mean we can conclude that ellipsis does not ameliorate islands.

3.4 Discourse considerations

- Why, then, is Merchant's (2004) original example unacceptable?

- Barros et al. (2015) argue that there is no valid alternate source for the sluice:

(28)   Does Abby speak the same Balkan language that ↗ [Ben] speaks?

    a.   *No, it's Charlie.

    b.   *No, Charlie speaks it.

    c.   *Charlie, Abby speaks the same Balkan language (that) *t* speaks.

- This is where previous parts of Weir's dissertation return (specifically chapter 3).

- One of his novel proposals is that the licensing of clausal ellipsis is governed in part by something that he calls QUD-GIVENness.

If you read section 5 of Merchant 2004, QUD–GIVENness is meant to help cover out–of–the–blue fragments in addition to those with linguistic antecedents.

- I will eschew the technical details here; suffice it to say that Weir argues that in order for (clausal) ellipsis to be felicitous, the licensing condition must make reference to the discourse context.

- Weir points out that if this is right, it may become difficult to tell why a particular fragment is illicit: It may violate an island or it may not licensed in the particular discourse.

- Looking back at (28), Weir points out that the most salient reading is one where the speaker is looking wants to know what languages Abby speaks.

    – *Charlie* is not a good answer to that question.

- In support of this view, Weir suggests that languages are, in fact good answers:

(29)   a.   Does Abby speak the same Balkan language that ↗ [Ben] speaks?

    b.   No, Slovenian.

I do not find this particularly acceptable myself.

- He also suggests that sufficient context can provide enough of a discourse context for the ellipsis.

(30)   *Context: We have before us lots of people. We know that these people are made up of lots of pairs of people who speak the same language as each other and who do not speak the same language as anyone else (*i.e., John and Mary both speak English and nothing else, Jan and Peter both speak Dutch and nothing else, *etc.) A and B are playing a game where A is trying to guess which people belong to which pair. A's just trying to guess the right pairings, though; the actual languages they speak is irrelevant to him, all that's relevant is that the people in the pair speak the same language. B knows the pairings and will answer A's questions. A had already worked out that Abby and Charlie were a pair a while ago, but had forgotten this.*:

    a.   Does Abby speak the same Balkan language that ↗ [Ben] speaks?

    b.   No, Charlie.

- Weir admits that the judgments here are 'difficult'. The point is that if the QUD-GIVENness idea is right, it becomes difficult to say off-hand that an ellipsis site contains an island.

4　Some thoughts & questions

1. Many of Weir's arguments are built on observations about what can grammatically front in English. But that movement, as he notes, is contrastive topicalization. Would/does focus movement have all the same properties?

   For instance, tt might not be possible to contrastively focus bare quantifiers, but can they be focused? Does focus movement of predicates freeze scope?

2. Relatedly, there are other languages, and a lot of those languages have productive, narrow-syntactic focus movement. Do these languages need PF movement to explain fragment answers? Do we expect to find empirical differences between languages like English and languages with *bona fide* focus movement?

3. Do we need overt movement for sluicing anymore? Is it just a coincidence that *wh*-elements move in the narrow syntax?

   This could play a role in *wh-in situ* languages (if they have sluicing); see Merchant 1998 and Richards 2001.

4. Weir (2014:177) references Abels's (2003) phase-based proposal of P-stranding. But it's not clear to me that this is coherent with his proposal. If PF movement is not feature based, and since Spell Out has already occurred, why should PF movement obey P-stranding?

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