This talk focusses on short (“fragment”) answers to questions, as exemplified in the dialogue in (1)

(1) a. Q: Who left the party at midnight?  
b. Ans: Claribel.  
c. Ans: Claribel left the party at midnight

where the strikethroughs here indicate material whose phonology is suppressed (or, which is deleted). Supposedly this explains why given the dialogue in (1a-b) we understand the answerer to be conveying the proposition expressed by (1c), and of course there have been many syntactic arguments to the effect that short answers really are “surrounded” by bigger chunks (e.g., Morgan, 1973, Merchant, 2004 and many others).

I will instead defend a position put forth originally in Groenendijk and Stokhof (1984) (hereafter G&S I) and in somewhat different terms but within the same spirit in Ginzburg and Sag (2000) (hereafter G&S II). (My own proposal is actually a slight variant of that of G&S I, but the differences will be of little concern here.) This proposal is that there is a linguistic construction: a question-answer pair (call it a Qu/Ans) with a syntax and a compositional semantics. The answer in (1b) by itself is just an ordinary NP; the syntax of a Qu/Ans requires (a certain amount of) category matching of the wh-word in a question and the category of the answer; and the compositional semantics of a Qu/Ans is such that the meaning of the question is put together with that of the answer to derive the proposition in (1c).

The defense of the G&Ss takes three parts. (A) The syntactic evidence for ellipsis (at least most of it) does not go through. Time will preclude going through all of this evidence, but I will hint at the general point and will show that case matching requirements (which underlie one of the most oft-cited arguments for ellipsis) actually do not follow from ellipsis but do follow from the Qu/Ans hypothesis. (B) I will provide new evidence against ellipsis (and for Qu/Ans). In short, this concerns the fact that there are ways in which the semantics of the question + answer taken together differ from the semantics of the supposed “source” for the short answer. The actual semantics follows immediately from the Qu/Ans analysis since the question provides some of the semantics. (C) As highlighted by my (admittedly slightly snarky) title, a listener of course does not hear the strikethroughs in ellipsis in general. Once we take that fact rather seriously, we will see that the whole chain of reasoning involved in ellipsis - both in getting the syntax to work and in getting the semantics to work - does not go through. In particular, the fact that (1b) is “understood” as conveying (1c) appears at first glance to follow immediately from the fact that it is (1c). But how does a listener - deaf to the strikethroughs - know this? The processing stories that need to be constructed here at the end of the day give no more insight into the empirical fact that listeners deduce the proposition in (1c) than does the Qu/Ans account.