

On QUD-based Licensing of Strict and Sloppy Ambiguities

According to standard theories of VP-ellipsis, possible readings are determined by constraints (syntactic, semantic, discoursal) that apply jointly to the antecedent and ellipsis clauses. Drawing on insights from a number of authors (e.g. Reich 2007, Kehler & Büring 2007, Kertz 2013, Weir 2013, Miller & Pullum 2014), I present two arguments for a model in which VP-ellipsis meanings are crucially dependent on the operative (and often implicitly resolved) question-under-discussion (QUD; Roberts 1998/2012), specifically requiring that the meaning of an ellipsis clause be a member of the QUD's alternative set. The first argument appeals to an example that lacks a sloppy reading even though standard theories predict it to be available. The second appeals to an example that appears to have a sloppy reading even though standard theories predict it to not be available.

For the first example, consider a context in which an award is being offered that (extended) families get to nominate a single family member for. A canonical example of VP-ellipsis such as (1) has two readings (capitalization indicates focus and accent placement); Mary's mom could be planning on nominating Mary's sister (the *strict* reading) or her own sister (the *sloppy* reading).

- (1) Mary_m was going to nominate her_m sister for the award, and her_m MOM was TOO.

Compare this with the variant in (2):

- (2) Mary_m was going to nominate her_m sister for the award, but her_m MOM already HAD.

Surprisingly, (2) only has the strict reading – it can only mean that Mary's mom nominated Mary's sister, and not her own – even though the sloppy reading is perfectly congruent with the context (i.e., the award rules say that Mary can't nominate her sister if her mom has already nominated her own). Standard theories straightforwardly predict that the sloppy reading should be possible (including, notably, the alternative semantics analysis of Rooth (1992)), in light of the availability of an antecedent VP that contains a bound pronoun.

These facts follow if the meanings of ellipsis clauses must be congruent with the operative (and here, co-resolved) QUD. The parallel clauses in (1) each provide partial answers to a single QUD; the strict and sloppy readings are both congruent with the inferrable QUD *Who was going to nominate who?* (among others). However, in example (2) the accent occurs on the auxiliary, and is only congruent with an intervening QUD containing polar alternatives, e.g. *Did someone already nominate Mary's sister for the award?* This QUD is accommodated into the larger strategy-of-inquiry evoked by the antecedent clause in (2) (cf. the NON-ACTUALITY IMPLICATURES of Grant et al. 2012) and the concessive. In this particular case, the fact that proposition denoted by the antecedent clause was derived from a VP that contains a bound pronoun doesn't come into play.

This analysis also explains an otherwise mysterious pattern noted for sluicing by Merchant (2001, p. 8), whereby sluicing appears to not generally allow sloppy readings (3a), despite the fact that one of Ross's (1969) original examples appears to permit it (3b).

- (3) a. Abby said she'd stop smoking, but Beth wouldn't say WHEN. (cf. Merchant's ex. (i)a)
 b. Bob knows how to crane his neck, but I don't know how.
 c. Abby said she'd stop smoking TOMORROW, but BETH wouldn't SAY when.

The reason for the discrepancy is evident: Whereas in (3a) the *wh*-term is focused in the sluiced clause, in (3b) the subject *I* is focused. On a QUD-based analysis of sluicing (Ginzburg and Sag 2000, AnderBois 2014), only in (3b) do both clauses provide partial answers to a QUD that includes

bound variable alternatives (*Who knows how to crane his neck?*). Again, the bound variable is irrelevant for the QUD that (3a) gives rise to (*When will Abby stop smoking?*). As predicted, we find the variant of (3a) in (3c) to have a sloppy reading with contrastive accent placed as indicated (QUD = *When did who say they'd stop smoking?*).

The second argument is based on an example due to Hardt (1992, 1999):

- (4) Every boy in John's class hoped Mrs. Smith would pass him. In John's_j case, I think she WILL. [pass him_j] (variant of Hardt 1999, ex. 8)

The ellipsis clause appears to admit of a sloppy interpretation – *I think she will pass John* – despite the fact that the kind of syntactic and/or semantic parallelism required by standard analyses is clearly lacking. The apparent rebinding of the pronoun *him* to *John* in the ellipsis clause led Hardt to conclude that pronouns within elided material are not subject to parallelism conditions of the Sag/Williams variety, but instead reinterpreted freely in the ellipsis site using the same discourse principles that apply to overt pronouns (see Kehler and Shieber (1997) for a dissenting view).

Here, I argue for a different analysis, in which the phrase *In X's case* (along with variants *Regarding X*, *As for X*, etc) denotes a QUD constructed by substituting *X* for a parallel element within a proposition provided by the context, in this case by the antecedent clause (*Will Mrs. Smith pass John?*). As in (2), the ellipsis clause, in which the auxiliary is focused, is congruent with the polar alternative set associated with this QUD. The claim that phrases like *In X's case* denote QUDs is supported by the felicity of follow-ons that canonically serve as short answers to questions:

- (5) a. I think Mrs. Smith will pass most of the students in the class.
b. But in John's case, forget it / no chance / PUHLEEEASE!

These completions clearly comment on the QUD *Will Mrs. Smith pass John?* introduced by *in John's case* as posited above. On this analysis, therefore, the interpretation of (4) represents a strict reading with this QUD-denoting phrase serving as the antecedent. Tellingly, this analysis correctly predicts that the ellipsis clause in (6) can have the same 'sloppy' interpretation as (4):

- (6) I think Mrs. Smith will pass most of the students in the class. In John's_j case, however, I don't think she will. [pass him_j]

Note that unlike (4), however, *the antecedent of (6) doesn't contain a pronoun*. In both (4) and (6), the QUD is created by substituting John for the direct object in the antecedent, and hence in (4) the pronoun is not even copied to, let alone reinterpreted within, the elided clause. Finally, the analysis explains why the otherwise analogous example in (7), from Kehler and Shieber (1997), does not license a similar reading, since ordinary PPs like *Last night at Bob's party* do not denote QUDs.

- (7) Every boy_i was hoping that Mary would ask him_i out, but the waiting is over.
Last night at Bob's_j party, she did. [asked him_j out]

In sum, these examples argue that the felicity conditions on VP-ellipsis make crucial reference not only to the antecedent and ellipsis clauses, but to the operative QUD as well. Further details on how ellipsis clause meanings and QUDs are co-resolved, and extensions to related facts concerning deaccenting, will be provided in the talk.

Selected References: Anderbois 2014, *Language* to appear; Grant et al. 2012, *JML* 66(1):326-343, Kehler & Büring 2007, *NELS* 38; Kertz 2013, *Language* 89(3):390-428; Roberts 1998/2012, *Semantics & Pragmatics* 5(6):1-69; Weir, 2013 *NELS*-44.