Ellipsis without movement in premodified reduced clefts

Outline: An influential line of research initiated by Merchant (2001) argues that ellipsis involves a full syntactic structure in which syntactically triggered PF-deletion takes place. This deletion is triggered by an ‘E feature’ on a focus head F that attracts the focused remnant to SpecFP and triggers PF-deletion of the complement of F. This talk will look at a previously undescribed type of ellipsis in Russian and English clefts and argue in favour of a non-movement deletion analysis. In terms of its syntactic properties, this type of ellipsis resembles a cross between gapping and stripping. We show that a non-movement analysis of cleft ellipsis accounts for the fact that clefts involving ellipsis do not involve the obligatory contrastive interpretation characteristic of full clefts in Russian (and certain full clefts in English), and that certain cleft foci are permitted under ellipsis which are not possible in full clefts.

Two types of truncated clefts: Like the English it-cleft, the so-called èto-cleft in Russian may occur in a full or a ‘truncated’ form, as in (1a,b) respectively. A second type of ‘truncated cleft’ (TC) is illustrated in (1c); unlike (1a,b), this construction features a copular verb (where an appropriate form is available), and the focused constituent bears default nominative case rather than the case corresponding to the gap in the full cleft:

(1) a. Èto Ivana Maria ljubila. Full cleft
    this Ivan-ACC Maria-NOM loved
    ‘It was Ivan that Maria loved.’

b. Èto Ivana. Type 1 TC
    this Ivan-ACC

c. Èto byl Ivan. Type 2 TC
    this was.3.SG.M Ivan-NOM

The two ‘truncated’ constructions also differ in their distribution: while Type 2 TCs may occur in a similar range of situations to the truncated English it-cleft, Type 1 TCs are highly restricted in their distribution. Both forms may occur in the equivalent of Declerck & Seki’s (1990) ‘premodified reduced it-clefts’ (PRCs), in which the ‘deleted’ material is in the same sentence as its ‘antecedent’, as shown in (2). Yet only Type 2 TCs may occur in contexts such as (3), in which a sentence boundary separates the ‘deleted’ material from its ‘antecedent’:

(2) a. Esli Maria ljubila kogo-to, to èto Ivana. Type 1 TC
    if Maria loved someone then this Ivan-ACC

b. Esli Maria ljubila kogo-to, to èto byl Ivan. Type 2 TC
   if Maria loved someone then this was Ivan-NOM
   ‘If Maria loved anyone, then it was Ivan.’

(3) A: Maria ljubila Borisa.
    Maria loved Boris

    B: #Net, èto Ivana! Type 1 TC
    no this Ivan-ACC

    B: Net, èto byl Ivan! Type 2 TC
    no this was Ivan-NOM
    ‘A: Maria loved Boris. B: No, it was Ivan!’

This distinction between the two types of TCs parallels the distinction between gapping (which may not occur across sentence boundaries) and other types of ellipsis (VP-ellipsis, ellipsis in DP, sluicing and stripping, which may cross sentence boundaries). Interestingly, Type 1 TCs also pattern with gapping with respect to most of the other properties that distinguish it from the other types of ellipsis: they may not occur in subordinate clauses, they may not precede their antecedent, and they apparently do not have to delete a phrasal constituent (unless movement of the remnant is assumed).

A non-movement analysis: According to the line of argument taken in Merchant (2001), the case connectivity in Type 1 TCs suggests they are derived by deletion of the remainder of the clause containing the focus, while the lack of connectivity in Type 2 TCs suggests that the focus is not part of a deleted clause (although it says nothing about whether there is a deleted clause).
For Type 1 TCs, then, we can imagine two possible analyses: one in which the focused remnant undergoes A’-movement prior to deletion (as in Merchant’s analysis), and one in which there is no movement, only deletion:

(4)  a. Èto Ivana ona uvidela.
    b. Èto ona uvidela Ivana.

We will argue that (4b) is the only possible analysis, which means that (i) deletion need not involve A’-movement of the remnant, and (ii) deletion need not target a constituent. The main evidence for this concerns the interpretative differences between TCs and full clefts. Full clefts in Russian are infelicitous as answers to wh-questions; they are only felicitous in a context where the focus is explicitly contrasted with an alternative in the discourse context. Full clefts in English, on the other hand, are felicitous in both types of environments if the focus is DP or (a particular type of) PP. This difference between Russian and English can be captured in terms of whether the focus undergoes A’-movement: in Russian clefts, the focus must undergo movement, whereas it may be base-generated in English DP- and PP-clefts. That is, A’-movement leads to an obligatory contrastive interpretation, a generalisation that is already established in the literature (e.g., É. Kiss 1998, Molnár 2006). Interestingly, PRCs in Russian do not have an obligatorily contrastive interpretation, unlike full clefts: no explicit mention of any alternatives is required, as can be seen from the example in (2a). Furthermore, English full clefts in which the focus is anything other than DP or PP (e.g., AP) pattern with Russian clefts in requiring a contrastive interpretation, yet the equivalent PRCs do not require such an interpretation; this is shown in (5). Finally, there are certain types of phrase that cannot appear in full clefts, such as VP, yet these may occur in PRCs; this is shown in (6):

(5)    a. A: What colour are her eyes?
       B: #It’s green that her eyes are.
       b. A: Her eyes are blue.
       B: No, it’s green that her eyes are, not blue.
       c. If there’s any colour she’d like her eyes to be, it’s green.

(6)    a. #It’s mow the lawn that she’d like to do most, not feed the cat.
    b. If there’s anything she’d like to do most, it’s mow the lawn.

These facts can naturally be accounted for under the non-movement analysis, but not under the movement analysis. If the focus does not in fact move in PRCs, then the lack of obligatory contrastivity follows. Second, the fact that VP may occur in PRCs but not full clefts can be understood if there is no movement in PRCs: VP can be a focus remnant, but cannot undergo the movement that takes place in full clefts. Our observations thus support the idea that certain kinds of ellipsis involve unpronounced syntactic structure while arguing against the idea that there is ellipsis-licensed movement and that all ellipsis involves deletion of a constituent.

Because of the similarities between PRC ellipsis and stripping, our findings suggest that stripping too should receive a non-movement analysis, contra Merchant (2001). This would involve a return to the view that there is a fundamental difference between deletion rules that delete phrasal constituents (e.g., VP-ellipsis, sluicing, ellipsis in DP) and those that involve deletion of ‘variables’ (arbitrary strings) in Ross’s (1967) sense (e.g., gapping, stripping, ellipsis in PRCs). Phrasal deletion, but not variable deletion, can target subordinate clauses and can operate backwards. We explore the implications of this categorisation further in the talk.

References