Fragment answers and the Question under Discussion*

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1 Introduction

I investigate sentence fragments, in particular answers to questions.

b. Who left early? — Mary.

Key question: are these covertly clausal (i.e. elliptical), as below, or base-generated ‘bare’ constituents?

(2) a. What did John eat? — John ate chicken.
b. Who left early? — Mary left early.


• In particular Jacobson 2013 raises worries for an elliptical account of fragments given that in some cases, short answers have different properties from full clausal answers, and from answers containing VP ellipsis.

(3) Which mathematics professor left early?
   a. Jill left early, but she’s not a mathematics professor.
b. Jill did, but she’s not a mathematics professor.
c. #jill, but she’s not a mathematics professor.

*I’d like to thank my advisors Kyle Johnson, Jeremy Hartman and Ellen Woolford for comments on this material, as well as three anonymous NELS reviewers and the participants in the Identity in Ellipsis workshop at Leiden University, September 2013. All errors are mine.
I propose that these data are in fact not problematic for the clausal ellipsis view of fragments if we assume that the identity conditions on clausal ellipsis make reference to the Question under Discussion.

2 Clausal ellipsis account of fragments: Merchant 2004

- In Merchant 2004’s analysis of fragments, a focused constituent raises to a left-peripheral position. The rest of the clause then elides.

- Syntactic implementation same as proposal for sluicing (Merchant 2001): the left-peripheral head which attracts the fragment (wh-word in sluicing) to its Spec is endowed with an [E]-feature which elides its complement.

\[
\begin{align*}
(4) & \quad a. \quad \text{What did John eat? — Chicken.} \\
& \quad b. \\
& \quad \text{FP} \\
& \quad \text{FP} \\
& \quad \text{DP} \quad \text{FP} \\
& \quad \text{Chicken} \quad \text{F[E]} \quad \text{TP} \\
& \quad \text{TP} \\
& \quad \text{DP} \quad \text{TP} \\
& \quad \text{John} \quad \text{T} \quad \text{vP} \\
& \quad \text{ate} \end{align*}
\]

- This ‘movement-plus-ellipsis’ approach has also been adopted for other ‘remnant’ cases, like why-stripping (John ate chicken. Why chicken?) by Yoshida et al. 2013 (see also Weir to appear) and for so-called ‘non-constituent coordination’ (John met with Mary on Tuesday and Bill on Wednesday) by Sailor & Thoms 2013

- Merchant 2004 amasses considerable syntactic evidence for this approach to fragments.

  - Case connectivity: the case of a fragment answer is the same as the case which it would bear in a full, non-elliptical utterance (parallels Ross 1969’s demonstration of the same facts for sluicing).

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1This is a slight oversimplification of Merchant’s syntax for fragments. In fact Merchant has the fragment move again to a position higher than the Spec of the [E]-bearing head. This is not germane here so I abstract away from it.
Fragment answers and the QUD
NELS 44, UConn, October 18 2013

(5) Greek (Merchant’s (45, 46))
      who.NOM saw the Maria — the Giannis.NOM / the Giannis.ACC 
      ‘Who saw Maria? — Giannis.’
   b. Pjon idhe i Maria? — *O Giannis. / Ton Gianni. 
      who.ACC saw the Maria? — the Giannis.NOM / the Giannis.ACC 
      ‘Who did Maria see? — Giannis.’

(6) German (Merchant’s (49, 50))
      who.DAT follows Hans — the.DAT teacher / the.ACC teacher 
      ‘Who is Hans following? — The teacher.’
      who.ACC seeks Hans — the.DAT teacher / the.ACC teacher 
      ‘Who is Hans looking for? — The teacher.’

– Movement-based constraints: only constituents that are independently observed to move in a language can be fragment answers in that language. E.g. languages that require pied-piping of prepositions in general systematically require this in fragment answers (the P-stranding generalization; see also Merchant 2001).

(7) (Merchant 2004’s (72, 78))
   a. With whom was Peter talking? — With Mary. / Mary.
      with whom has Anna spoken with the Hans / the Hans 
      ‘Who did Anna speak to? — Hans.’

• The P-stranding generalization is particularly strong evidence for a movement strategy (and hence covert clausal structure) in these examples: ‘to date, no-one has even hinted at how to account for these facts without using a theory of preposition-stranding, and no-one has ever proposed a theory of preposition-stranding that distinguishes German from English on anything but morphosyntactic grounds’ (Merchant 2010)
3 And yet…

3.1 Jacobson’s challenge

Jacobson 2013 points out that when the question contains a presupposition, short/fragment answers have different properties from full/clausal answers:

(8) (adapted from Jacobson)
Which mathematics professor left the party at midnight?

a. Jill left the party at midnight… but she’s not a mathematics professor.

b. Jill did… (but she’s not a mathematics professor.)

c. Jill… (# but she’s not a mathematics professor.)

The fragment answer (8c) commits the speaker to the view that Jill is a mathematics professor, in a way that the full answer (8a) – and also the example with VP ellipsis, (8b) – does not.

Jacobson’s examples require a particular prosody (contrastive topic marking) in (8a, b), but the below examples (due to Jeremy Hartman, p.c.) show that this is not the culprit for the badness of (8c); even with falling/focus prosody, the contrast remains.

(9) Which Brontë sister wrote Emma?

a. JANE AUSTEN wrote Emma (you fool).

b. JANE AUSTEN did (you fool).

c. #JANE AUSTEN (you fool).

The answer in (9c) is inappropriate because it commits the speaker to the view that Jane Austen was a Brontë sister. Note that again the VP ellipsis case is OK. Similar facts can be seen in cases where the answer is a quantifier:

(10) Which students were dancing in the quad?

a. Some Germans were dancing in the quad… (but they weren’t students).

b. Some Germans were… (but they weren’t students).

c. Some Germans (# but they weren’t students).

The short answer in (10c) commits the speaker not just to the proposition that some Germans were dancing, but that some German students were dancing.

Constraints that have been proposed for ellipsis, such as e-GIVENness (Merchant 2001 et seq.), do not predict this behavior of fragment answers, or the difference between fragment answers and VP ellipsis (if we think the same constraint is involved in both).
3.2 Jacobson’s solution

Jacobson takes the contrast between the VP ellipsis cases and the short answer cases as indicative that ellipsis is not involved in deriving the short answers. In Jacobson’s proposal, short answers directly compose with the meaning of an antecedent question, understood as a (possibly partial) function from entities to propositions:

\[
\lambda x \in \text{student} : \text{dancingInQuad}(x)
\]

\[
\lambda P \exists x : \text{german}(x) \& P(x)
\]

\[
\exists x \in \text{student} : \text{german}(x) \& \text{dancingInQuad}(x)
\]

This derives the contrasts above, but:

- Jacobson’s proposal requires an antecedent to be found of the correct semantic and syntactic category, that of a question (semantic type and syntactic category being tightly connected in the categorial-type syntax of Jacobson’s Direct Compositionality approach). But not only questions license fragments: indefinites and focused constituents can too:

\[
\begin{align*}
\lambda x \in \text{student} : & \text{dancingInQuad}(x) \\
\lambda P \exists x : & \text{german}(x) \& P(x) \\
\exists x \in \text{student} : & \text{german}(x) \& \text{dancingInQuad}(x)
\end{align*}
\]

- The above suggests to me that we should make our account sensitive not just to explicit questions, as Jacobson suggests, but also to implicit questions, such as the Question under Discussion (Roberts 2012/1996).

- In addition, fragments show syntactic connectivity effects. Jacobson does propose ways of deriving binding connectivity effects, but it is less clear how a Direct Compositionality approach captures the P-stranding cross-linguistic generalization, for example.

4 The constraint on clausal ellipsis

- Jacobson argues from the difference between VP ellipsis and short answers that ellipsis is not involved, and that proponents of the clausal ellipsis approach would have to claim:

  - (a) that clausal ellipsis works differently from VP ellipsis; and
  - (b) that the antecedence conditions on the clausal ellipsis involved in fragment answers (and, presumably, other forms of clausal ellipsis) makes reference to questions. (Intuitively, short answers have to be ‘real’ answers to the question posed.)

- I bite the bullet: both of these are true.
• Evidence has been building up that this is the case. In particular, the suggestion that (clausal) ellipsis makes reference to questions in its antecedence conditions has been proposed for gapping by Reich 2007 and sluicing by AnderBois 2010.

• I propose my version of this question-based constraint, and show how it captures the problematic cases.

4.1 Questions

• I assume Groenendijk & Stokhof 1984’s view of questions as functions from worlds \( w \) to the proposition which is the true answer to the question in \( w \).

\[
[\text{Who left}] = \lambda w \lambda w': [\lambda x : x \text{ left in } w] = [\lambda y : y \text{ left in } w']
\]

(14) Toy example: in \( w_0 \) only John left, in \( w_1 \) only Mary left, in \( w_2 \) both left, and in \( w_3 \) no-one left.

\[
[\text{Who left}] = \begin{cases} 
\langle w_0, \lambda w' : \text{John left in } w' \text{ and no-one else left in } w' \rangle \\
\langle w_1, \lambda w' : \text{Mary left in } w' \text{ and no-one else left in } w' \rangle \\
\langle w_2, \lambda w' : \text{John and Mary left in } w' \rangle \\
\langle w_3, \lambda w' : \text{No-one left in } w' \rangle 
\end{cases}
\]

• I will sometimes write ‘that John left’ to refer to the proposition \( [\lambda w' : \text{John left in } w'] \). So we could rewrite (14) as:

\[
[\text{Who left}] = \begin{cases} 
\langle w_0, \text{that John left and no-one else left} \rangle \\
\langle w_1, \text{that Mary left and no-one else left} \rangle \\
\langle w_2, \text{that John and Mary left} \rangle \\
\langle w_3, \text{that no-one left} \rangle 
\end{cases}
\]

• This function can be seen as ‘partitioning’ the domain of worlds: all the possible answers (none of which overlap) to the question Who left are given in (15), and the function that the question denotes takes a world and maps it to the proposition that is the (complete) true answer at that world.

• The appropriate discourse move to respond to a question is to indicate which partition the actual world belongs to, by giving the answer that (the speaker believes) is true in the actual world.


• Expressing that ‘John left’ is the answer tells your interlocutor that the actual world is in one of those partitions of worlds in which ‘John left’ is true (in our toy model, \( w_0 \) or \( w_2 \)).
Sometimes the actual response given is not one that is in the Groenendijk and Stokhof denotation of the question, but pragmatic reasoning will nevertheless let us conclude from the response which partition the actual world belongs to.


The question Which Brontë sister wrote Emma represents the following partition:

\[
\begin{align*}
\langle w_0, \text{that no Brontë sister wrote Emma} \rangle \\
\langle w_1, \text{that Charlotte wrote Emma} \rangle \\
\langle w_2, \text{that Emily wrote Emma} \rangle \\
\langle w_3, \text{that Anne wrote Emma} \rangle
\end{align*}
\]

‘That Jane Austen wrote Emma’ is not in this partition. However, the response Jane Austen wrote Emma lets us conclude that the answer to the question (in the above technical sense) is ‘that no Brontë sister wrote Emma’; such ‘indirect’ responses can therefore still be understood as giving an answer to the question.

4.2 Questions and short answers

How will this help the problem with short answers? Well, consider the question Which math professor left early? Assume, for simplicity, that (in all worlds) John and Mary are math professors, and no-one else is. Then this question has the denotation:

\[
[\text{Which math professor left early}] = \\
\begin{align*}
\langle w_0, \text{that John left early and no other math professor left early} \rangle \\
\langle w_1, \text{that Mary left early and no other math professor left early} \rangle \\
\langle w_2, \text{that John and Mary left early} \rangle \\
\langle w_3, \text{that no math professor left early} \rangle
\end{align*}
\]

Notably, Jill appears in no answer to the question Which math professor left, even if she did in fact leave, because Jill is not a math professor.

We can use this to encode Jacobson’s intuition that short answers have to be ‘real’ answers to the question, i.e. that the below is infelicitous.

(20) Which math professor left early? — #Jill, but she isn’t a math professor.

\[^2\text{I ignore worlds in which two or more of the sisters collaborated.}\]
(21) **Condition on clausal ellipsis**
Given a clause \( E \) (interpreted at a world \( w' \)) which denotes a proposition \( p \), and a Question under Discussion \( QUD \) (understood as a function from worlds to propositions):
Ellipsis of \( E \) is licensed iff the true answer to the QUD at the world of evaluation entails \( [E] \), i.e. \( QUD(w') \Rightarrow p \).

- We can encode this as a presupposition that has to be met if the ellipsis-licensing \( [E_C] \) feature is used. (The \( C \) is for ‘clausal’, to remind us that this feature does not participate in e.g. VP ellipsis, but only clausal ellipsis.)

(22) Presuppositional denotation for (clausal) \( E \)-feature:
\[
[[E_C]]^{QUD} = \lambda p \lambda w : p(w), \text{ iff } QUD(w) \Rightarrow p; \text{ otherwise undefined.}
\]

- I assume focus reconstruction. I assume that the movement of the focused constituent is fundamentally forced by the need for focused material to escape the domain of ellipsis (Yoshida et al. 2013).³

(23) **What did John eat? — The cake.**

a. \([\text{FocP} \text{The cake Foc}_C \text{ [TP John ate the cake]}]\)

b. After reconstruction: \([\text{FocP Foc}_C \text{ [TP John ate the cake]}]\)

(24) a. \( QUD = \lambda w \lambda w' : [\lambda x : \text{John ate } x \text{ in } w] = [\lambda y : \text{John ate } y \text{ in } w']
\[
= \{ \langle w_0, \text{that John ate the cake and nothing else} \rangle, \\
\langle w_1, \text{that John ate the chicken and nothing else} \rangle, \\
\langle w_2, \text{that John ate the cake and the chicken} \rangle, \\
\langle w_3, \text{that John ate nothing} \rangle \}
\]
b. \( QUD(w_0) = \lambda w' : \text{John ate the cake and nothing else in } w' \)
c. \( [\text{John ate the cake}]^{QUD} = \lambda w : \text{John ate the cake in } w \)
d. \( [[[E_C] \text{ John ate the cake}]^{QUD} = \lambda w : \text{John ate the cake in } w \)

Presupposition: \( QUD(w) \Rightarrow [\text{John ate the cake}] \)

- The presupposition that \( [E_C] \) introduces is that the true answer to the question at the world of evaluation must entail the meaning of the elided clause (‘John ate the cake’), which is trivially true here.

- This example is somewhat trivial but let’s see where it gets us with the more problematic examples.

³I remain neutral about how we pick the material that becomes focused in the first place, assuming that this will follow from something like Schwarzschild 1999’s proposal of GIVENness.
4.3 Handling the Jacobson cases

- The problematic Jacobson example:

\[(25) \text{Which mathematics professor left early?} \]

a. Jill did (but Jill isn’t a math professor).

b. #Jill (but Jill isn’t a math professor).

\[(26) \text{QUD} = \lambda w \lambda w' : [\lambda x \in \text{mathProf} : x \text{ left early in } w] = [\lambda y \in \text{mathProf} : y \text{ left early in } w'] \]

- In our toy model, only John and Mary are math professors (and this is constant across worlds), so the question’s denotation is:

\[(27) \text{Which math professor left early} = \begin{cases} \langle w_0, \text{that John left early and no other math professor left early} \rangle \\ \langle w_1, \text{that Mary left early and no other math professor left early} \rangle \\ \langle w_2, \text{that John and Mary left early} \rangle \\ \langle w_3, \text{that no math professor left early} \rangle \end{cases} \]

- Now let’s see what our clausal ellipsis feature makes of this:

\[(28) \text{[EC] Jill left the party early}^{\text{QUD}} = \lambda w : \text{Jill left the party early in } w \]

Presupposition: \(\text{QUD}(w) \Rightarrow [\lambda w' : \text{Jill left the party early in } w'] \)

- The answer to the question in \(w_0\), that is \(\text{QUD}(w_0)\), is ‘that John left early and no other math professor left early’. This clearly does not entail ‘that Jill left the party early’. So the presupposition in (28) is not met: and the answer is infelicitous.

- This also handles the Brontë sister cases:

\[(29) \text{Which Brontë sister wrote } \text{Emma?} \]

a. Jane Austen did (you fool).

b. #Jane Austen (you fool).

\[(30) \text{QUD} = \lambda w \lambda w' : [\lambda x \in \text{Bronte} : x \text{ wrote Emma in } w] = [\lambda y \in \text{Bronte} : y \text{ wrote Emma in } w'] \]

\[(31) \text{[[EC] Jane Austen wrote Emma}^{\text{QUD}} = \lambda w : \text{Jane Austen wrote Emma in } w \]

Presupposition: \(\text{QUD}(w) \Rightarrow [\lambda w' : \text{Jane Austen wrote Emma in } w'] \)

- \(\text{QUD}(w_0) = \text{‘that no Brontë sister wrote } \text{Emma’}. \) This does not entail ‘that Jane Austen wrote Emma’, so the presupposition of (31) is not met.
• The below case is more interesting.


(33) \[
QUD = \lambda w \lambda w' : [\lambda x \in \text{student} : x \text{ left early in } w] = [\lambda y \in \text{student} : y \text{ left early in } w']
\]

\[
= \begin{cases}
\langle w_0, \lambda w' : s_1+s_2 \text{ left in } w' \rangle \\
\langle w_1, \lambda w' : s_1 \text{ left in } w' \text{ and no other student left in } w' \rangle \\
\langle w_2, \lambda w' : s_2 \text{ left in } w' \text{ and no other student left in } w' \rangle \\
\langle w_3, \lambda w' : \text{no student left in } w' \rangle
\end{cases}
\]

(34) a. [Some Germans [EC] [left early]]
    after reconstruction: [[EC] Some Germans left early]

b. [[EC] Some Germans left early] \( \overset{QUD}{=} \lambda w : \text{some Germans left early in } w \)

    Presupposition: \( QUD(w) \Rightarrow [\lambda w' : \text{some Germans left early in } w'] \)

• For (34) to be felicitous, we need the proposition \( QUD(w_0) \), i.e. ‘that s1+s2 left early’, to entail the meaning of the elided clause, ‘that some Germans left early’.

• This entailment doesn’t go through on its own, but it would if we ensured that in the domain of worlds that we are considering in the context, s1 and s2 are Germans.

• I propose that this restriction on the contextually relevant domain of worlds is accommodated on hearing the answer in (34), to make the entailment go through. So (34) is understood as presupposing that s1 and s2 left and that s1 and s2 are Germans (in all the worlds that are considered contextually relevant).

### 4.4 Fragments licensed by non-explicit questions

• Fragments are not just licensed by explicit questions/interrogatives: focus also licenses fragments.

(35) a. John likes \textsc{chicken}. — No, beef./Beef, too.

b. Does John like \textsc{chicken}? — No, beef./Yes. Beef, too.

• That focus placement affects what the Question under Discussion is (for example, in (35), the QUD is \textit{What does John like?}) is well known, starting from Roberts 2012/1996.

• The condition proposed here on clausal ellipsis predicts that fragments should be licensed by focus; the implicit QUD brought about provides the presupposition for the [EC]-feature.
(36) a. John likes \textsc{chicken}.
Focus placement tells us: Question under Discussion is \textit{What does John like?}, i.e:
\[ QUD = \lambda w \lambda w' : [\lambda x : \text{John likes } x \text{ in } w] = [\lambda y : \text{John likes } y \text{ in } w'] \]
b. No, beef. = \[\text{Beef } [E_C \text{ ] John likes t}] \].
c. \[\text{[}[E_C \text{ ] John likes beef]} = \lambda w : \text{John likes beef in } w \]
Presupposition: \[QUD(w) \Rightarrow [\lambda w' : \text{John likes beef in } w'] \]
d. \[QUD(w_0) = \text{‘that John likes beef (and fish and lamb and… and nothing else)’}, \]
which clearly does entail ‘that John likes beef’, therefore presupposition met.

- Indefinites can also license fragments.\(^4\)

(37) John said someone here had the key to the liquor cabinet. — Yeah, Mary.

- It’s less obvious precisely how indefinites affect the QUD\(^5\), but intuitively it’s clear that (37) is pragmatically understood here as a question.
- That is, we can pragmatically understand the QUD to be something like ‘Is what John said to me true, and if it is, who is it that has the key?’ These two questions are then answered in turn by ‘Yes, Mary’. These cases can therefore also be captured by the QUD-based condition.

5 Extending the condition to other forms of clausal ellipsis

- In order to construct a case that clausal ellipsis is involved in fragment answers, we want the proposed condition to generalize to other forms of clausal ellipsis.
- I think there is preliminary evidence that it does indeed generalize, following AnderBois 2010.

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\(^4\)These cases are problematic for Jacobson, as she requires that there be an \textit{overt} question-denoting constituent in the antecedent to license a short answer. Jacobson claims that indefinites don’t license fragments as such, and that there is a contrast between these two cases (her judgments):

(i) a. ?\#Someone left the party at midnight — Claribel.
b. I know who left the party at midnight — Claribel.

I do not detect this contrast, however; both sound acceptable to me.

\(^5\)In Inquisitive Semantics, indefinites are inherently ‘inquisitive’; see AnderBois 2010 for an application of this idea to sluicing. Indefinites and interrogatives (and foci) also have a close link in that they can all be seen as ‘alternatives generators’, particularly in e.g. the Hamblin semantics of Kratzer & Shimoyama 2002 and Kratzer 2005. Equating interrogatives’, indefinites’, and foci’s ability to license fragments in terms of ‘alternative generation’ therefore seems tempting; at this juncture equating all of them seems to me to be too strong, but further research is required.
• In particular, AnderBois points out the following contrasts.

(38)  *Indefinites license sluicing, but (semantically equivalent) double negation does not*
  a. Someone left, but I don’t know who.
  b. #It’s not the case that no-one left, but I don’t know who.

(39)  *Content within appositives cannot provide a sluice’s antecedent*
  a. John once killed a man in cold blood, but he can’t even remember who.
  b. #John, who once killed a man in cold blood, doesn’t even remember who.

• AnderBois points out that VP ellipsis is OK in these cases, further suggesting that the condition on clausal ellipsis differs from that on VP ellipsis:

(40)  a. It’s not the case that no-one left, but I don’t know who did.
  b. John, who doesn’t look after his sister, says that Mary should.

• AnderBois proposes to capture this condition on clausal ellipsis by saying that there must be identity between the ‘inquisitive content’ (in an Inquisitive Semantics framework) of the sluiced clause and the antecedent – roughly, that the antecedent and the sluice must ‘raise the same issues’.

• Double negatives and appositives do not have ‘inquisitive content’ (they do not ‘raise issues’), and so do not license sluicing.

• I think fragment answers suggest that this identity condition would not be quite right as a condition on clausal ellipsis in general – fragment answers don’t have ‘inquisitive content’ (the potential to raise issues); they *settle* issues.

• But I think the intuition that the sluicing cases in (38b), (39b) are bad because their antecedents do not raise questions is the right one.

• Intuitively, double negative cases are very hard to understand pragmatically as questions, and indefinites within appositives are impossible to.

(41)  a. Mary told me that someone left.
  b. Mary told me that it wasn’t the case that no-one left.

(42)  a. Mary told me that John once killed a man in cold blood.
  b. Mary told me that John, who once killed a man in cold blood, is nice once you get to know him.

• The (a) sentences above are easily understood as requests for information, as questions, and therefore plausibly as QUD-sets. The (b) sentences (for some reason) cannot be so construed.
• It is therefore plausible that the differences in (38), (39) are because the condition on clausal ellipsis demands that the QUD have an answer that entails the meaning of the elided clause. This is satisfied in (38a), (39a), but not in (38b), (39b) (because the QUD in the latter cases can only be understood as something like What did Mary tell me?

• The details of this need to be worked out – in particular what the denotation of the sluiced clause is such that the answer to the QUD can be in the correct entailment relationship – but hopefully this sketch motivates the idea that the QUD-based clausal ellipsis condition here can extend beyond just fragment answers.

6 A note on syntactic isomorphism and antecedents

I have proposed a mechanism for clausal ellipsis which relies on a semantic-pragmatic antecedence condition: the answer to the Question under Discussion has to entail the elided proposition.

Does this mean that the only condition on clausal ellipsis is semantic, and that more-or-less anything can be construed into a clausal ellipsis site as long as the semantic condition is met? This looks promising given exophoric/antecedentless fragments of the type discussed in Robert Stainton’s work.

(43) a. [I get into a taxi.] The train station, please.
b. [At a meeting, someone nods at an empty chair and raises their eyebrows. I say:] An editor of Natural Language Semantics.

A QUD-based analysis (alone) predicts that these fragments should be good: the QUD is very salient in cases like (43) and can ‘guide’ the construal of the material in the ellipsis site.

However, if you have an overt antecedent, then syntax is king.

(44) Voice matching obligatory (Merchant 2010’s (23b), German)

      who.NOM has the boy examined? by a psychologist
      ‘Q: Who examined the boy? A: [intended] (He was examined) by a psychologist.’
      by who.DAT was the boy examined a psychologist.NOM
      ‘Q: Who was the boy examined by? A: [intended] A psychologist (examined him).’

The generalization seems to be that if an overt antecedent is present, it must be used to construct the material within an ellipsis site (perhaps using an LF-copy model such as Chung et al. 2011). This conclusion is also drawn by Merchant 2010 (sec. 7).

Another worry for the present account is cases where it seems very difficult to understand the fragment as answering any sort of question. Exclamations provide the best example of this:

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6 Thanks to a NELS reviewer whose name I don’t know for pointing me in this direction.
Merchant 2004 proposes that these can be understood by inserting sufficiently semantically vague predicates (like that is, it is, there is, do it etc.). But note that this strategy can’t be fully general; it overgenerates. One cannot construe it is as being within an ellipsis site if there is an overt question, for example.

(46) Was what you saw scary?
   a. It was a wolf. (Of course it was scary.)
   b. #A wolf. (Of course it was scary.)

As an empirical matter, there seems to be a ‘hierarchy’ of interpretive modes one must use (as suggested by Merchant 2010). If you can use any higher-ranked way of constructing what is within a clausal ellipsis site, you must use that way, and cannot use any below it:

(47) Copying material from a syntactically overt antecedent \(\Rightarrow\) Construing material ‘into’ the ellipsis site on the basis of the QUD \(\Rightarrow\) it is (etc.) insertion

I don’t want to make the claim that (47) is ‘in’ the grammar, but it seems to be empirically true as a statement. Hopefully future research into principles of interpretation may shed light on why this should be.

7 Conclusion

• The problems that Jacobson 2013 raises for the clausal ellipsis account of fragments are not problems, if we say that a condition on clausal ellipsis makes reference to question meaning.

• I propose that we can retain a clausal ellipsis analysis if our condition makes reference to the Question under Discussion.

• I argue this accounts for the ability of not just interrogatives, but also indefinites and focused constituents to license fragments.

7 Another possibility is put forward by Merchant 2010; in this work, Merchant proposes that these sort of fragments really should be interpreted as directly generated subsententials without clausal ellipsis, which receive an interpretation via semantic ‘slot-filling’, roughly finding a value for free variables in the denotation of the property or generalized quantifier denoted by the fragment. I don’t take up the issue here of whether this will be ultimately required.
References


