Fragment answers and the Question under Discussion

Andrew Weir • University of Massachusetts Amherst

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.


Jacobson 2013 points out that in some cases, short answers have different properties from full clausal answers, and from answers containing VP ellipsis.

How it works

Clausal ellipsis is licensed if the true answer to the QUD entails the meaning of the elided clause.

(17) \[ (E_1)^{QUD} = \lambda p w \cdot \text{if } QUD(p,w) \Rightarrow p; \text{ otherwise undefined.} \]

• I assume that the focused constituent moves to escape ellipsis at PF but is interpreted in its base position.

   b. Who left early? — (Mary ate) the cake.

The presupposition is trivially met in the ‘normal’ cases:

(19) a. QUD(w_1) = \lambda w' \cdot John eat w' the cake
   b. QUD(w_2) = \lambda w' \cdot John ate the cake in w' Presupposition: QUD(w_1) \Rightarrow (John ate the cake)

... but starts doing work for us in Jacobson’s problematic cases...

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

• Assume a toy model in which only John and Mary are math professors (in all worlds), so:

(21) a. [Which math professor left early] = \{(w_1, \lambda w’ \cdot John left early and no other math professor left early in w’), (w_2, \lambda w’ \cdot John and Mary left early in w’), (w_3, \lambda w’ \cdot no math professor left early in w’)\}
   b. QUD(w_1) = \lambda w' \cdot John left early and no other math professor left early in w'.
   c. QUD(w_2) = \lambda w' \cdot John and Mary left early in w'.
   d. QUD(w_3) = \lambda w' \cdot no math professor left early in w'.

(22) (Jill left the party early)^{QUD} = \lambda w' \cdot Jill left the party early in w' Presupposition: QUD(w_1) \Rightarrow (Jill left the party early)

The presupposition here is that QUD(w_1) entails that Jill left the party early. But QUD(w_1) = ‘that John left early’, so the presupposition is clearly not met, and the ellipsis is ruled out.

Indefinites and focused constituents license fragments because they raise/presuppose QUDs (see also AnderBois 2010 for sluicing in Inquisitive Semantics).

(23) a. Someone left early. — Yeah, Mary.
   b. John left early. — No, Mary.

(implicit QUD: Who left early?)

(23') (presupposed QUD: Who left early?)

Further work

• Extend condition to clausal ellipsis of questions i.e. sluicing (AnderBois 2010)

• Can a QUD-based condition help understand out ‘of the blue’ fragments, e.g. ‘the train station to a taxi driver (Stainton 2006)?

• Syntactic isomorphism is still required: what is the nature of this requirement?

(24) Voice matching obligatory (Merchant 2010’s (236), German)


Who the boy examined? by a psychologist.

Who the boy examined? by a psychologist NOM

Who the boy examined? by A: [intended] A psychologist examined him.)

Acknowledgments and references

I’d like to thank my advisors Karl Johnson, Jeremy Harmsen and Ellis Woodford for comments on this material, as well as those anonymous NELS reviewers and the participants in the Identity in Ellipsis workshop at Leeds University, September 2013. All errors are mine.

