

Understanding Ellipsis: Internal Structure and Incremental Processing

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Real-time language comprehension heavily relies on instant and constant mapping between the linguistic input and its meaning: as new words are encountered the parser updates the previously constructed hierarchical representation of structure based on various linguistic information of the input and the world knowledge. In this sense, language comprehension is often regarded as an incremental process. However, ellipsis challenges such nature of language comprehension. In ellipsis, some of the necessary material is omitted, and yet it is semantically recoverable. In other words, ellipsis is a context where the parser computes meanings without necessary ingredients. This leads to a non-trivial question: why does the language comprehension not fail when processing ellipsis as there are no overt material that can be mapped to meanings, and how can meanings be achieved without overt material?

Through two online experiments, we demonstrate that processing sluicing, a type of a clausal ellipsis, also involves the incremental structure-building process, a well-known processing profile of Wh-Filler-Gap dependency. These findings suggest that the ellipsis site contains syntactic structure parallel to that of non-sluicing wh-constructions, enabling the parser resolves a WhFGD formed in the ellipsis site in the manner as in a non-sluicing wh-construction.