Metalinguistic ellipsis:
playful silence in adverts, titles, and slogans

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Abstract

'Metalinguistic ellipsis' flouts the conditions on ellipsis to playful and memorable effect; e.g. *Everyday vehicles that aren't*, *A DP that may not be*, and *Yes We Can*. Such adverts, titles and slogans strain the relationship between antecedent and ellipsis, feeling awkward but being all the more noticeable for it. Focusing on predicate ellipsis, this contribution surveys the manner and extent to which the conditions on ellipsis can be metalinguistically stretched, encompassing recoverability, ambiguity, argument structure, antecedent containment, (ad)nominal antecedents and contrast.

1 Introduction

In certain contexts, the conditions on ellipsis can be flouted to playful and memorable effect. Some examples of what I dub 'metalinguistic ellipsis' are previewed in (1):

(1) a. It is. Are you? (= 3)

 b. Yes We Can (= 6)

 c. Everyday vehicles that aren't. (= 9)

 d. I keep my hands clean! Why can't he? (= 11)

 e. Nokia – the phone that works where you do. (= 24)

 f. A routine that's anything but. (= 41)

 g. Binominal *each*: A DP that may not be. (= 48)

The adverts, slogans, and titles in (1) strain the relationship between antecedent and ellipsis, feeling awkward but being all the more noticeable for it. Their 'meta' quality consists in setting the reader a puzzle that riffs on their knowledge of language – specifically, the conditions on ellipsis.

Focusing on predicate ellipsis, this contribution surveys the manner and extent to which the conditions on ellipsis can be metalinguistically stretched. Section 2 begins with the most fundamental of these, recoverability. Sections 3-6 consider some of the identity conditions on ellipsis, encompassing ambiguity resolution, argument structure alternations, antecedent containment, and (ad)nominal antecedents. Section 7 considers the limits of metalinguistic ellipsis, paying particular attention to contrast. Section 8 compares metalinguistic ellipsis with other register-specific phenomena, before section 9 concludes.

2   Recoverability

Ellipsis might seem to radically undermine form-meaning mapping, in that we interpret meaning in the absence of phonological form. As it is, however, elided content must be recoverable from a linguistic antecedent (most succinctly, Fiengo & Lasnik 1972). This condition of recoverability is what classifies ellipsis as 'surface' rather than 'deep' anaphora (Hankamer & Sag 1976). Even in the rich context of (2), the attempt at ellipsis in (a) is infelicitous for lack of a linguistic antecedent. This differs from deep anaphora with *do it* in (b), which is felicitous in the same context:[1]

(2)   (Context: Sag produces a cleaver and prepares to hack off his left hand.)
    a. Hankamer: #Don't be alarmed, he never actually does.   *ellipsis*
    b. Hankamer: Don't be alarmed, he never actually does it.   *pro-form*

Adverts, however, can flout the recoverability condition on ellipsis to intriguing effect. Recoverability is somewhat stretched by (3), a hoarding advert for the launch of a UK newspaper in 1986:

(3)   It is. Are you?

As discussed by Garnham & Oakhill (1992), the four words in (3) were all that was legible on the hoarding from a distance, rendering the two ellipses unrecoverable. Only at closer range was an antecedent provided by the title of the new newspaper – the *Independent*.

Likely riffing on (3), the recoverability condition is stretched further in (4), introducing a product from Wall's ice cream:

(4)   It isn't. Are you?

As Garnham & Oakhill (1992) continue to discuss, the advert bore the Wall's logo on a background of tessellating triangles, but provided no antecedent for the ellipses. Only the subsequent advert in (5) supplied the product name and the missing predicate:

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[1]Ellipsis does not always require a linguistic antecedent. For a comprehensive list of apparently lexicalised exceptions, including those in (i), see Miller & Pullum (2013: 5, ex. 7):

(i)   a. Shall we?
    b. Don't!

Still, Miller & Pullum (2013) argue that antecedent-less ellipsis is not limited to fixed idioms. Rather, such 'exophoric' verb phrase ellipsis is reasonably productive in circumstances of permission, directives, and explicitly stated alternatives. The last of these covers the advertising tagline for Clariol hair dye in (ii), discussed by Schachter (1977):

(ii)   Does she or doesn't she?

However, none of these circumstances characterise the examples that follow in this section.

(5)   Tempo. It isn't square.

Recoverability is arguably stretched even further by (6), a slogan from Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign:

(6)   Yes We Can

Antecedents could often be found for the ellipsis in (6) in the context of Obama's speeches. As a standalone slogan, however, no antecedent is available, cannily allowing potential supporters to supply their own.

Clearly, the unrecoverable ellipses in (3), (4) and (6) would be unacceptable outside of their advertising and sloganising contexts. Decontextualised, they might draw retorts of: *It is what? It isn't what? We can what?* What these examples show is that the recoverability condition on ellipsis can be metalinguistically manipulated in intriguing and politically effective ways. The following four sections turn to identity conditions on ellipsis, beginning with the resolution of ambiguities.

3   Ambiguity

A recovered antecedent must be 'identical' to the ellipsis (e.g. Hankamer 1971, Sag 1976). This requirement for identity manifests itself in various ways. One aspect of identity in ellipsis is that ambiguities must be resolved in the same way as in the antecedent. Take (7), for example:

(7)   a. John visited the bank before Mary visited the bank.
       b. John visited the bank before Mary did.

Due to the lexical ambiguity of *bank*, the fully pronounced (a) is four-ways ambiguous: John and Mary each went to either a financial institution or a riverside. The elliptical (b), on the other hand, is only two-ways ambiguous: either John and Mary both went to a financial institution, or they both went to a riverside. In short, the meaning of *bank* must remain fixed across antecedent and ellipsis.

Another example is (8), where *lift a finger* can have a literal or idiomatic meaning:

(8)   a. John didn't lift a finger, and neither did Mary lift a finger.
       b. John didn't lift a finger, and neither did Mary.

Again, the fully pronounced (a) is four-ways ambiguous: the idiomatic or literal interpretation of *lift a finger* is free to change between the conjuncts. The elliptical (b), on the other hand, is only two-ways ambiguous: the interpretation of *lift a finger* must remain constant across antecedent and ellipsis. Hence (b) means either that John and Mary both did nothing to help, or that neither of them raised a digit.

Thus the fixing of ambiguities is one of the ways that ellipsis maintains identity with its antecedent. In the context of advertising, however, this requirement for ambiguities to be resolved consistently can be flouted to memorable metalinguistic effect. Beginning with lexical ambiguity, consider the advert for Suzuki in (9), discussed by McQuarrie & Mick (1996):

(9)   Everyday vehicles that aren't.

The intended reading of (9) involves ellipsis of *everyday*, but with a different meaning from its antecedent: 'for daily use' as the pronounced antecedent becomes 'ordinary' in the ellipsis site.

For another example, consider again the Wall's ice cream advert from (4) and (5), the relevant parts of which are combined here as (10):

(10)   It isn't square. Are you?

The intended reading again plays on lexical ambiguity, with the meaning of *square* changing from 'equal-sided rectangle' in the antecedent to 'boringly conventional' in the ellipsis site.[2]

 Turning to idioms, consider the advert for Lava soap in (11), cited by Todó (2009):

(11)   I keep my hands clean! Why can't he?

The interpretation of *keep one's hands clean* switches from literal in the antecedent to idiomatic in the ellipsis site: I use soap; why can't he keep out of sordid business?

 The switch goes the other way round in the jingle in (12):

(12)   Sometimes you feel like a nut,
       Sometimes you don't.
       Almond Joy's got nuts,
       Mounds don't.

Limiting ourselves to the first ellipsis,[3] the interpretation of *feel like a nut* that springs to mind is the idiomatic one: 'consider oneself crazy'. But as the jingle resolves into an advert for two Hershey's chocolate bars, the intended interpretation turns out to be the literal one: 'fancy eating some, e.g., almonds'.

 Thus the identity condition that requires ambiguities to be fixed across antecedent and ellipsis can be flouted to metalinguistic effect in advertising. Notice that this license to bend the rules is limited to contexts where playfulness and memorability is the aim. The examples in (13) and (14) attempt to parallel (9) and (11); but given the more mundane circumstances, ellipsis fails:

(13)   John takes a daily jog through the beautiful grounds of a country estate.
        *So his everyday run isn't.

(14)   I need to put this fingertip heart rate monitor on you, so please lift a finger.
        *It's so easy, you don't even need to!

 To the extent that idioms are phrasal entries in the lexicon, all the examples in this section have involved lexical ambiguity. The identity requirement for ambiguities to be fixed across antecedent and ellipsis is more general, encompassing, for example, scope (15) (Fox 2000) and structural (16) ambiguities. As above, the four-way ambiguities in (a) reduce to two-way ambiguities with ellipsis in (b):

(15)   a. Some girl saw every teacher before some boy saw every teacher.
       b. Some girl saw every teacher before some boy did.

(16)   a. Mary saw the man with the binoculars before Jane saw the man with the binoculars.
       b. Mary saw the man with the binoculars before Jane did.

In (15), the scope ambiguities – *every > some* vs. *some > every* – are independent in each conjunct of (a), but must be resolved the same way with ellipsis in (b). Similarly in (16), the PP

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[2]Perhaps also consider again the newspaper advertising hoarding from (3), with the name of the newspaper supplied in (i):

(i)   The Independent. It is. Are you?

The intended reading involves different senses of *independent* in each ellipsis: 'free of constraining ownership' in the first, 'free-thinking' in the second.

[3]Though the second ellipsis in (12) is also plenty interesting. See, e.g., Fodor & Smith (1978), Stockwell & Schütze (2019).

attachment ambiguities – 'seeing using binoculars' vs. 'the man has binoculars' – are independent in (a), but must remain fixed in (b).

It is difficult to see how scope ambiguity could be manipulated for snappy metalinguistic impact; a limp attempt is offered in (17):

(17)   (Context: a television advert for a selection box of six different chocolate bars.)
(Scene: six children each enjoying one of the chocolate bars.)
A kid will love every treat. *every > a*
(Cut to scene: one adult devouring all six chocolate bars.)
??A grown-up will, too! *a > every*

Structural ambiguity is perhaps at play in the Costa Coffee tagline in (18). *A little better* shifts from modifying *everything* in the antecedent to modifying the coffee making in the ellipsis, with an associated change in structure: [make [things better]] vs. [[make coffee] better]. But the effect might rest more on the idiomaticity of the former:

(18)   Everything is made a little better when your coffee is.[4]

A final example involving ambiguity – which may or may not be lexical – is the message from Netflix in (19):

(19)   You have downloads which are ready to watch when you are.[5]

The intended reading of (19) seems to be that the downloads are ready to be watched when you are ready to watch them. This sort of thematic ambiguity – a thing being ready for acting on vs. an agent being ready to act – is usually not possible under ellipsis. In (20), the four-way ambiguity of (a) reduces to a two-way ambiguity with ellipsis in (b) (Lakoff 1968, Sag 1976):

(20)   a. The chicken was ready to eat before the duck was ready to eat.
      b. The chicken was ready to eat before the duck was.

In (a), the ambiguity – 'ready to partake of food' vs. 'ready to be consumed' – is independent in each conjunct. But as usual with ellipsis, in (b) the ambiguity must be fixed to match the antecedent. If this ambiguity originates in the lexical entry for *ready*, (19) is another example of lexical ambiguity being metalinguistically manipulated in ellipsis. If the ambiguity instead derives from structural differences, (19) should be counted among the more syntactic manipulations of the identity conditions on ellipsis, as discussed over the next three sections.

4   Argument structure

Argument structure mismatches are generally not possible under ellipsis. Take causative-inchoative alternations, for example. Verbs like *melt* and *freeze* can be transitively performed by an agent acting on an object, or can happen intransitively of their own accord. With ellipsis, switching in either direction between antecedent and ellipsis is ungrammatical – from causative to inchoative, as in (21), or from inchoative to causative, as in (22) (Sag 1976: 160, Johnson 2004: 7):

(21)   * Bill melted the copper, and the iron did as well. *int.* 'the iron melted'

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[4]https://www.vml.com/work/made-a-little-better

[5]Observed by Michelle Sheehan on Facebook. Cf. e.g.:
https://myhumax.org/forum/topic/1000s-cannot-access-ondemand-netflix-works
https://broadbandinternetuk.com/blog/3639/sky-comondemand

(22) * This can freeze. We really should.   *int.* 'we should freeze it'

Yet mismatches along similar lines can be found in advertising contexts. Take (23) and (24) from McCloskey (2018: 8, ex. 13):

(23) Paranormal Zone – making sense of things that don't.[6]

(24) Nokia – the phone that works where you do.[7]

In (23), as in (21) and (22), there is a switch in both transitivity and agentivity. Agentively making sense of something in the antecedent mismatches with things intransitively doing so in the elliptical clause. In (24), on the other hand, there is a switch only in agentivity. Antecedent and ellipsis are both intransitive, but there is a mismatch between phones working inanimately in the antecedent and people working agentively in the elliptical clause. This particular mismatch involving *work* is strikingly popular, per the further examples from advertising and political sloganising in (25) and (26):

(25) We've engineered, tested and re-engineered products that work as hard as you do.[8]

(26) The University of California only works because we do.[9]

The title in (27), meanwhile, provides an example of a switch only in transitivity. While agentivity remains consistent – the point being about equating people and computers – transitivity switches from transitive *think something* to intransitive *think*:

(27) Why People Think Computers Can't.[10]

As in the previous section, the very same mismatches are unacceptable outside of an advertising or sloganising context. The examples in (28)-(30) attempt to parallel (23), (24) and (27). But given the sincere circumstances, any metalinguistic impact is precluded, and ellipsis fails:

(28) * As a researcher, your job is to make sense of things that currently don't.

(29) * My phone provider is so useless – my mobile never works where I do.

(30) * For philosophical reasons, I think computers can't.

In sum, prohibitions on argument structure alternations between antecedent and ellipsis can be metalinguistically flouted in contexts where being eye-catching is the aim. The next section continues with syntactic aspects of identity by turning to the structural relationship between antecedent and ellipsis.

5 Antecedent containment

This section tackles the ellipsis in (31):

(31) When do we punish people who don't?[11]

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[6]Cf. https://yourbestlifeafter50.com/tag/making-sense-of-things-that-dont/
[7]Cf. e.g.: https://www.pinterest.com/pin/565061084502687392/
[8]https://www.oarsandalps.com/pages/about-us
[9]https://www.latest.facebook.com/UCSBGSA/posts/2857977984261230
[10]https://doi.org/10.1609/aimag.v3i4.376 – observed by Chris Collins on Facebook.
[11]https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2019.104040 – observed by Carson Schütze.

This title of a journal article stands out as odd but comprehensible. Its intended interpretation appears to be: 'When do we punish people who don't punish people?' Notice that the elided verb phrase (VP) *punish people* is dominated by its antecedent VP *punish people who don't*; and that the elided VP is contained in a subject relative clause.

It can be grammatical for a VP to be elided when it is dominated by its antecedent. Example (32) illustrates this phenomenon, known as Antecedent Contained Deletion (ACD) (Sag 1976):[12]

(32)   We reward people who you do.

   a.   we [$_{\text{VP-A}}$ reward [$_{\text{DP}}$ people [$_{\text{RC}}$ who$_i$ you do [$_{\text{VP-E}}$ ~~reward~~ t_i]]]]

   b.   * we [$_{\text{VP-A}}$ reward [$_{\text{DP}}$ people [$_{\text{RC}}$ who$_i$ you do [$_{\text{VP-A}}$ reward [$_{\text{DP}}$ people [$_{\text{RC}}$ who$_i$ you do [$_{\text{VP-E}}$ ~~reward~~ t_i]]]]]]]

   c.   [$_{\text{DP}}$ people [$_{\text{RC}}$ who$_i$ you do [$_{\text{VP-E}}$ ~~reward~~ t_i]]]$_j$ we [$_{\text{VP-A}}$ reward t_j]

Ellipsis is possible in (32) despite the antecedent VP apparently containing the elided one, as bracketed in (a). Attempting to resolve the ellipsis by substituting the antecedent VP for the elided one would lead to infinite regress – the substituted VP will still contain a missing VP, as greyed in (b).[13] This problem can be solved by assuming that the DP object moves covertly, as in (c), so that the antecedent VP no longer contains the elided one. This assumption further means that the antecedent and elided VPs are identical with respect to having A-bar traces in object position.

It is crucial that (32) involves objects – the elided VP is contained in the object of its antecedent, and contains an A-bar trace of relativisation on the object. Consider now (33):

(33)   * We reward people who do.

   a.   we [$_{\text{VP-A}}$ reward [$_{\text{DP}}$ people [$_{\text{RC}}$ who$_i$ t_i do [$_{\text{VP-E}}$ ~~reward people~~]]]]

   b.   we [$_{\text{VP-A}}$ reward [$_{\text{DP}}$ people [$_{\text{RC}}$ who$_i$ t_i do [$_{\text{VP-A}}$ reward [$_{\text{DP}}$ people [$_{\text{RC}}$ who$_i$ t_i do [$_{\text{VP-E}}$ ~~reward people~~]]]]]]]

   c.   [$_{\text{DP}}$ people [$_{\text{RC}}$ who$_i$ t_i do [$_{\text{VP-E}}$ ~~reward people~~]]]$_j$ we [$_{\text{VP-A}}$ reward t_j]

The presumptive elided VP again appears to be contained in the object of its antecedent, as in (a). For this reason, substitution will fall to infinite regress, as before in (b). But this time, the structure in (c) with covert movement of the object DP fails also. This is because the object is formed by relativisation on the subject. Hence identity cannot be established between the antecedent and elided VPs with respect to their object positions – the A-bar trace in the antecedent VP mismatches with *people* in the elliptical one. This mismatch causes ellipsis to fail.

And yet, the attested (31) at the start of this section follows exactly the pattern of (33).[14] The elided VP is contained in the object of its antecedent, but does not itself contain an A-bar trace in object position. In the context of an article title, therefore, an identity mismatch between a trace and another DP is one that can be metalinguistically flouted to attention-grabbing effect.

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[12]Abbreviations: VP-A = antecedent verb phrase; VP-E = elided verb phrase; DP = determiner phrase; RC = relative clause.

[13]Additionally, the higher *who* lacks a base position.

[14]Recall also (27), repeated here as (i):

(i)   Why People Think Computers Can't.

As in (31)-(33), the antecedent VP looks to contain the elided one. This containment relationship could be resolved by covert movement of *think*'s CP complement. That would leave the transitivity mismatch discussed above as the only issue in (i).

The next section turns to issues of identity in terms syntactic category, paying particular attention to nominal and adjectival antecedents.

6 (Ad)nominal antecedents

Living up to its name, verb phrase ellipsis generally involves ellipsis of verb phrases (VPs), with VP antecedents. In (34), for example, ellipsis is of the VP *lectured on Crete*:

(34)   Jim has lectured on Crete, and Tim has, too.

Despite its name, however, verb phrase ellipsis can involve missing predicates of other syntactic categories. The examples in (35) illustrate for prepositional phrases (PPs) (a), adjectival phrases (APs) (b), and determiner phrases (DPs) (c):

(35)   a. Jim was on Crete, and Tim was, too.

  b. Jim's lectures were good, and Tim's were, too.

  c. Jim is a syntactician, and Tim is, too.

It is sometimes possible for the categories of antecedent and ellipsis to mismatch. The examples in (36) and (37) from Hardt (1993) demonstrate that nominals can serve as antecedents for ellipsis of VPs:

(36)   Meanwhile, they sense a drop in visitors to the city.
  Those who do, they say, are taking cabs. (Hardt 1993: 35, ex. 118)
  int. 'visit the city'

(37)   The candidate was dogged by charges of infidelity and avoiding the draft,
  or at least trying to. (Hardt 1993: 35, ex. 120)
  int. 'avoid the draft'

In sum, 'verb phrase' ellipsis is possible with matching pairs of VPs, PPs, APs and DPs, as well as with mismatching DP-VP. The rest of this section considers four further pairings, focusing on nominal and adnominal antecedents. In overview, while it is not usually possible for nominals to antecede ellipsis of predicates other than VPs, such mismatches are common in attention-grabbing contexts. We will see as much for switches from DP to AP, and from referential to predicative DPs. The status of adnominal AP vs. predicative AP mismatches is less clear. Finally, we will consider mismatches involving nominal compounds.[15]

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[15]Aside from (40) and (59), the attested metalinguistic examples to follow in this section would fall to a constraint against ellipsis finding an antecedent within the subject of its clause. A constraint to this effect was proposed by Wasow (1972: 92) based on examples like (i):

(i)   a. * A proof that God exists does. (Wasow 1972: 93, ex. 16a)

  b. * Your proof that my proof is valid isn't. (Kennedy 2004: ex. 1b)

However, Kennedy (2004) reaches the conclusion – contra Kennedy (1994) – that examples like (i) are not in fact ill-formed. Rather, ellipsis with subject-contained antecedents can reach decent levels of interpretability or felicity. The examples from (i) are massaged in (ii) by subordinate clause embedding in (a) and by the addition of an additive particle in (b):

(ii)   a. ? History suggests that a proof that God exists never will. (Kennedy 2004: ex. 20a)

  b. ? Your proof that my proof is valid is as well. (Kennedy 2004: ex. 17b)

To begin, it is not usually possible for nominals to provide antecedents for ellipsis of AP predicates. Examples (38) and (39) illustrate with failed attempts at DP-AP mismatches:

(38)   * Why did you buy those oranges when they weren't yet?

(39)   * Chris ordered a pint of bitter, then looked strangely disappointed when it was.

In (38), the noun *oranges* fails to serve as an antecedent for ellipsis of the adjectival predicate *orange*. Likewise in (39), the noun *bitter* fails to antecede the adjective *bitter*.

Yet ellipses of exactly this kind – nominal antecedent for adjectival ellipsis – are common in advertising. In fact, we have already seen an example following this pattern. Consider again the advert for a newspaper launch from (3), presented with the antecedent made legible in (40):

(40)   The Independent. It is. Are you?

The name of the newspaper supplies an adjectival predicate to resolve the ellipses. Further examples of nominal-adjectival mismatch are (41) and (42). Example (41) can be found in a number of reviews and headlines, while (42) is the title of a 2005 song by 'The Evens':

(41)   A routine that's anything but.[16]

(42)   Mt. Pleasant isn't.[17]

That switches of this sort – from nominal to adjectival – are usually not possible is reinforced by the examples modelled on (40)-(42) in (43)-(45):

(43)   * Have you tried reading the *Independent*? I generally find that it isn't.

(44)   * A safe that's anything but is useless.

(45)   * I went for a walk up Mt. Pleasant but it wasn't.

Second, even sticking to nominals, it is not usually possible for referential DPs to serve as antecedents for ellipsis of predicative DPs. Examples (46) and (47) illustrate:

(46)   The CCTV footage clearly showed three tall boys.
        *So it was very surprising when the prime suspects weren't.

(47)   (Context: a group of late 20s males are giggling like children.)
        *Boys need their laughs, even if they're not any more.

In (46), the referential DP *three tall boys* fails to serve as an antecedent for ellipsis of the same DP, but in predicate position. Likewise in (47) for the DP *boys*.

Moreover, many of the constructed examples in this section would not fall to a ban on subject-contained antecedents, showing that the bans on (ad)nominal mismatches, as discussed in the main text, have broader empirical coverage.

[16]https://www.dallasobserver.com/arts/a-routine-thats-anything-but-6427438
https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/tagged/health/photos/coolest-bags-shapes-sizes-under-slideshow/-photo-2571256-154400897.html
https://comicvine.gamespot.com/reviews/alex-ada-6/1900-3014/
https://www.realestatelicensetraining.com/what-does-a-real-estate-agent-do/
[17]https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3EKIOeg-I1M – observed by Matthew Tyler on Facebook.

And yet, such switches from referential to predicative DP are attested in the article titles in (48)-(50):[18]

(48)   Binominal *each*: A DP that may not be.[19]

(49)   Korean "case stacking" isn't.[20]

(50)   School Shootings and the Heroes Who Shouldn't Be.[21]

That switches of this sort – from referential to predicative DP – are usually not possible is reinforced by the examples modelled on (48)-(50) in (51)-(53):

(51)   * Some linguists think DPs may not be.

(52)   * Schütze argues persuasively that Korean case stacking isn't.

(53)   * A: Respect our heroes!   B: Sorry, I don't think they are.

Third, it may be possible for adnominal APs to provide antecedents for ellipsis of predicative APs. Hardt (1993: 36) offers the dialogue in (54) from 'Streets of San Francisco':

(54)   A: Could you tell us about the party held in your home last night, ma'am?
        B: It was a very ordinary bash.
        A: What happened to one of your guests wasn't.

The adnominal AP *very ordinary* is intended as the antecedent for ellipsis of the predicate *(very) ordinary*. It is not clear that this mismatch is completely seamless. Speaker A feels to be cracking wise, coming across as a bit of a smart alec. Similar adnominal vs. predicative AP mismatches are found in the advert from (9), repeated here, and the article title in (56):

(55)   Everyday vehicles that aren't.

(56)   Bound VPs that need to be.[22]

To the extent that adnominal APs cannot usually antecede predicative ones, the ellipses in (55) and (56), and possibly (54), would count as metalinguistic.

Coming to our final type of mismatch involving (ad)nominal antecedents, it is not generally possible to source antecedents from within a compound noun. Examples (57) and (58) illustrate for attempted ellipsis of VP and AP, respectively:

(57)   *At playgroup, kids should.

(58)   (Context: pointing at a whiteboard)
        *I still call this a blackboard, even thought it's not.

Yet this ban on intra-compound antecedents is flouted to humorous effect in (59):

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[18]Lurking in (48)-(50) are parses with main verb BE meaning 'exists'. Since these parses do not involve ellipsis, they are not at issue here. Such parses may (intentionally) outcompete the elliptical ones in the google-able book titles in (i) (Stockwell 2020: 204):

(i)   a. The Tiger That Isn't
       b. The World That Isn't

[19]Title of Stowell (2013).
[20]Title of Schütze (1996).
[21]www.newyorker.com – 10 May 2019.
[22]Title of Haïk (1987).

(59)   (Caption to a cartoon of a Viking ship striking shore:)
       I shall call this 'Greenland', as one day it will be.[23]

To be sure, the very same mismatch would be unacceptable as (60), were it to appear in a sincere history textbook:

(60)   * Greenland was so named by Erik the Red in an attempt to convince people that it was.

In sum, the ban on mismatches between (ad)nominal antecedents and non-verbal ellipsis can be metalinguistically flouted. Since the opening discussion of recoverability, the past four sections have considered various identity conditions on ellipsis. The next section departs from the issue of identity to consider the limits of metalinguistic ellipsis.

7   The limits of metalinguistic ellipsis

The foregoing has shown how adverts, slogans and titles can successfully flout conditions on ellipsis. The closest those conditions have so far come to breaking was in terms of recoverability, at the outset in section 2; but even then, an antecedent was always eventually supplied – on closer inspection of the newspaper advertising hoarding, in the subsequent ice cream advert, or by the political inclinations of the slogan's target audience. This section considers cases that seem to stretch the conditions on ellipsis beyond breaking point. In the first case, an attested but questionable advert requires adding a predicate to the ellipsis. In the second set of cases, constructed examples of ellipsis fail – even in attention-grabbing contexts – in the absence of contrast.
Consider first the attested advert in (61):[24]

(61)   ?* Littlewoods Pools. It's daft not to.

Despite being in an advertising context, (61) feels awkward. We saw in section 6 that it is metalinguistically possible for nominals to antecede ellipsis of predicates. As Garnham & Oakhill (1992) discuss, however, simply substituting *Littlewoods Pools* into the ellipsis site would be ungrammatical. The addition of a predicate – most plainly *do* – would be needed to give: 'It's daft not to do Littlewoods Pools'. But the addition of a predicate feels too much of a stretch, with the result that (61) comes across as a less impactful advert.[25]

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[23]*Private Eye* 1504, p. 40, 6-19 September 2019.

[24]Littlewoods was the first provider of a betting pool premised on predicting score draws in Football League matches. The popularity of football pools declined shortly after the early 1990s advert in (61) with the introduction of the National Lottery.

[25]Noteworthy is the Best Buy slogan in (i):

(i)   Thousands of Possibilities. Get Yours.

This slogan involves noun phrase ellipsis of *possibility*. But while (i) is metalinguistically awkward, its awkwardness does not derive from any problem with the ellipsis itself. For sure, there is a mismatch between the plural antecedent *possibilities* and the singular elided noun. But, as (ii) shows, number mismatches are not a problem in noun phrase ellipsis:

(ii)   John bought three books. Mary bought just one.

Instead, the problem in (i) is the semantic anomaly of the sentence after the ellipsis has been resolved: a possibility is an odd thing to get.

Another limit on metalinguistic ellipsis appears to be contrast. It has been argued – explicitly by Griffiths (2019) and Stockwell (2018, 2020, 2022) – that predicate ellipsis requires contrast between the elliptical constituent and its antecedent. With this in mind, recall some of the metalinguistic examples from the previous section, repeated here in (62)-(64):

(62)   Everyday vehicles that aren't.   (= 9)

(63)   Mt. Pleasant isn't.   (= 42)

(64)   Korean "case stacking" isn't.   (= 49)

Notice the omnipresence of negation in (62)-(64). The opposition between a positive antecedent and a negative elliptical phrase – e.g. *(Mt.) Pleasant* vs. *not pleasant* in (63) – provides a means to satisfy contrast. Without such opposition, ellipsis becomes noticeably worse. Compare the attempts to parallel (62)-(64) without negation in (65)-(67), with the first example adjusted for plausibility:[26]

(65)   (Advertising a trendy hotel in Nevada:)
         * Cool rooms that are.

(66)   * Mt. Pleasant is.

(67)   * Korean "case stacking" is.

Without negation, there is no contrast, and ellipsis is bad – despite the attention-grabbing intent. The failure of ellipsis in (65)-(67) shows that the contrast condition on predicate ellipsis is not one that can be flouted for metalinguistic effect. Rather, it seems the requirement for contrast is fundamental to predicate ellipsis.

This contrast requirement is active across the remaining monoclausal metalinguistic examples from section 6. In (41), repeated here, the opposition between positive and negative is effected by *but* rather than *not*:

(68)   A routine that's anything but.   (= 41)

Stripped of this opposition, ellipsis is again far less acceptable in the parallel (69):

(69)   * Avoid routines that are.

The examples repeated in (70) and (71) feature negation, but also intensionality, contrasting the actual state of affairs with other possibilities or desires:

(70)   Binominal *each*: A DP that may not be   (= 48)

(71)   School Shootings and the Heroes Who Shouldn't Be   (= 50)

In (70), the actuality of binominal *each* as a DP contrasts with the alternative analytical possibility that it isn't. Similarly in (71), the reality of there being heroes in unfortunate circumstances contrasts with the desired state of affairs that there not be. The final repeated example in (72) shows that such contrasts in intensionality are sufficient, in the absence of negation:

(72)   Bound VPs that need to be.   (= 56)

In sum, metalinguistic ellipsis has its limits. Even in the catchy contexts of adverts and titles, it is difficult to conjure predicates in ellipsis sites *ex nihilo*, and predicate ellipsis requires contrast.

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[26]More directly, compare the failure of ellipsis in (65) with the relative success in (i):

(i)   (Advertising a trendy hotel in the Arctic:)
       Cool rooms that aren't.

8 Other register-specific phenomena

We have seen throughout that metalinguistic ellipsis is register-specific. Ellipsis mismatches that are deployed to metalinguistic effect in advertising and sloganising are unacceptable outside of those contexts. Thus metalinguistic ellipsis warrants comparison with other register-specific phenomena. This section briefly considers similarities and differences between metalinguistic ellipsis and the characteristic features of 'reduced written register' English (Weir 2017).

Reduced written registers – comprising diaries, recipes and headlines – permit subject drop (Haegeman 1990 et seq.), object drop (Weir 2017, Massam & Roberge 1989, Haegeman 1987), and article drop (Stowell 1991, 1999). All three kinds of drop are illustrated in (73) (Weir 2017):

(73) $\emptyset_{subj}$ Received $\emptyset_D$ credit card bill in $\emptyset_D$ mail today. $\emptyset_{subj}$ Will shred $\emptyset_{obj}$ later.

That these reductions are register-specific is shown by contrasting (73) with (74). Beyond the written diary context implicit in (73), any subject, object or article drop is unacceptable in the spoken dialogue in (74):

(74)   A: Have you heard anything from Mastercard?
       B: *(I) received *(a) credit card bill in *(the) mail today. *(I) will shred *(it) later.

In this sense, metalinguistic ellipsis is similar to reduced written register English. Just as the usual conditions on ellipsis can be relaxed within the register of adverts, slogans and titles, so the usual requirements for subjects, objects and articles to be overt are suspended within the register of diaries, recipes, and headlines.

However, while subject, object and article drop are specific to the reduced written register, they do not come accompanied by a discernible metalinguistic effect; besides indicating the register, no additional pragmatic meaning arises.[27] This is most unlike the ellipses surveyed in this contribution, which stand out for their playful manipulation of the various conditions on ellipsis. In this sense, metalinguistic ellipsis is very different from the characteristic features of reduced written register English.

9 Conclusion

Overall, this contribution has shown how conditions on ellipsis can be flouted to successful metalinguistic effect. Even the most fundamental condition of recoverability is floutable, as are identity conditions governing ambiguities, argument structure, antecedent containment, and (ad)nominal antecedents. The requirement for predicate ellipsis to contrast, however, is not. The rest of this section makes three final concluding points.

First, ellipsis can be metalinguistic in many ways at once. Several examples have been repeated across sections. For instance, the initial obscurity of the antecedent in (3) threatened recoverability. In addition, even once the antecedent was made legible in (40), repeated here, there is a usually-problematic nominal-adjectival mismatch:[28]

(75)   The Independent. It is. Are you?

Other repeated examples were (4-5, 10) and (9, 55), showing that it is possible for ellipsis to be multiply metalinguistic.

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[27]This despite Weir's (2017) analysis of object drop as involving ellipsis; specifically, noun phrase ellipsis in concert with article drop, following Tomioka (2003) for Japanese.

[28]Recall also note 2 on the distinct senses of *independent* in the ellipsis sites.

Second, the conditions on ellipsis are far from the only rules of language that can be flouted to attention-grabbing effect in the right context. The adverts in (76), for example, survey metalinguistic manipulation of homophony (a), near-homophony (b), word boundaries (c), and a garden path parse (d):

(76) a. Nothing runs like a Deere

b. Dollar Shave Club: Shave Time, Shave Money

c. If you want to get ahead, get a hat!

d. Have You Met Life Today?

Third, and finally, it is hoped that in surveying cases where the conditions on ellipsis have been metalinguistically stretched, this contribution has helped to clarify what those conditions are; in particular, the constraints on the availability of (ad)nominal antecedents, and the fundamentality of the requirement for contrast.

Acknowledgements

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