Phrasal complexity and ellipsis
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Recent research on interrogative wh-phrases suggests that differences in their behavior in filler-gap constructions follow from their phrasal complexity (Hofmeister 2010, Hofmeister and Sag 2010, and Hofmeister et al. In press). A which-NP phrase (which player) is richer in semantic and syntactic features, hence more complex, than a bare wh-phrase (who). Greater complexity of a filler wh-phrase aids its retrieval from memory when the gap is encountered. Another strand of research finds a similar effect of phrasal complexity in sluicing: which-NP phrases are better remnants (1) than bare wh-phrases (2), given the same NP correlate (a new vehicle) (Frazier and Clifton 2011). Frazier and Clifton attribute this effect to which-NP phrases, but more than just the complexity of the remnant contributes to the improved acceptability of sentences like (1), because the phrase retrieved from memory is the correlate, not the remnant. In this paper I explore how the features of a remnant interact with the features of its correlate in sluicing and three further elliptical constructions. I address this issue in the context of preposition omission in these constructions.

Using data collected from three corpora of spoken American English, I develop a mixed-effects model (Baayen et al. 2008) of speakers’ choices between preposition omission and preposition retention, as (3). Mixed-effects modeling permits an insight into whether complex correlates (with or without complex remnants), for example, the NP correlate and which-NP remnant shown in (4), favor preposition omission. I coded the data for phrasal complexity such that NPs and which-NP phrases were complex phrases, but (indefinite or interrogative) pronouns and bare wh-phrases were not (see (3)).

For sluicing, which-NP remnants, where the head NPs are commonly absent, only combine with complex (NP) correlates. Indeed, coupling a pronominal (noncomplex) correlate with a which-NP remnant seems degraded (5)-(6). This suggests that the form of wh-remnants is less central to the phenomenon of preposition omission than the form of their correlates.

Across all constructions, complex correlates show a significantly stronger preference for preposition omission than noncomplex correlates (p < .002). This preference was confirmed by a comparison (split-100 task via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk) of speaker ratings for selected items from the corpus data with corpus probabilities for these data. Given that remnants with and without prepositions differ in phrasal complexity (explicitness), their distribution is consistent with the predictions of Accessibility theory (Ariel 1990, 2001) and Hofmeister and colleagues’ results: a more explicit antecedent is retrieved with a less explicit anaphor, because it’s easily accessible. I propose that the use of prepositionless remnants signals the availability of accessible correlates in surrounding discourse, and the use of remnants with prepositions signals low-accessibility correlates.

These results add to cross-linguistic evidence for complex correlates strongly favoring remnants realized as prepositionless which-NP phrases in sluicing (Vicente 2006, 2008, Szczegielniak 2008, Stjepanovic 2008, Rodrigues et al. 2009, Caha 2011, Sag and Nykiel 2011). While this preference commonly receives syntactic, and language-specific, motivation, I argue that it’s best explained by appeal to memory retrieval, and hence, may be found in any language regardless of its syntax.

Examples
(1) Britney likes this guy who destroyed a new vehicle, but she didn’t reveal which vehicle.
(2) Britney likes this guy who destroyed a new vehicle, but she didn’t reveal what.
(3) a. A: Lisa had lunch with somebody B: Who?
   b. A: Lisa had lunch with somebody B: With who?
(4) A: We have the concert in the state park. B: (In) which state park?
(5) ?Jani was eager to live in something inexpensive but I don’t know (in) which apartment.
(6) ?Paula Abdul was replaced on American Idol by someone, but I don’t know (by) which musician.