Licensing Ellipsis Under Semantic Constraint: Experimental Evidence from German Sluicing and Its Parallels to Island Avoidance

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Background. According to the sententialist approach to ellipsis (Merchant 2001, 2004), clausal ellipsis involves the non-pronunciation of a TP to the exclusion of one phrase, i.e. the sluice, as in (1). The structure in the ellipsis site (E-site), is an ongoing debate in the literature (Nykiel 2013, Ronai & Stigliano 2020, van Craenenbroeck 2010, among other). That is, the E-site could be isomorphic to the antecedent clause, as in (1a), or a copular clause, as in (1b).

Barros et al. (2015) proposed that copular clauses are available as 'last resort' strategy to evade islands under ellipsis. In German, the structure of the E-site can be determined by the morphological form of the sluice (*ceteris paribus*). If the sluice is ACC-marked, the E-site must be isomorphic, as the sluice must have originated in the object position, as in (1a). In contrast, if the sluice is NOM-marked, the E-site must be a copular clause, as in (1b). Schiele (2024) tested German ACC- and NOM-marked sluices and found that copular clausal E-sites function as a 'last resort' strategy to derive sluices without island violations, aligning with Barros et al.'s (2015) predictions. This suggests that syntactic incongruence, such as island violations, is sufficient to license a copular clause as an E-site.

In addition, the definiteness of the correlate has been found to influence the processing of the sentence (Chung et al. 1995, Dayal & Schwarzschild 2010, Barros 2013). However, most of the analyses have been based on English and did not incorporate E-site as potential factor. In (2), the NOM-marked sluice must target the object in the antecedent clause (*einen der Praktikanten*) and cannot inquire about the antecedent subject (*Paul*) because the subject is definite, which would lead to a semantic incongruence. However, if the subject were indefinite, as in (3), the NOM-marked sluice could refer to the subject or the object.

This study tests whether semantic incongruence can license a copular clause as an E-site. We propose that the interpretation of the sluice depends on the definiteness of the correlate: if both correlates are indefinite, the case marking of the sluice determines its correlate; if the antecedent subject is definite, a NOM-sluice cannot target it and must instead refer to the antecedent object. Accordingly, we hypothesize that (**H1**) ACC-marked sluices, which are only compatible with an isomorphic E-site, must target the antecedent object and that (**H2**) NOM-marked sluices can target the antecedent object if the antecedent subject is definite.

Experiment. 32 German monolinguals were sourced via Prolific (online, unsupervised). The study tested E-SITE (isomorphic or evading) and DEFINITENESS (definite or indefinite correlate), as shown in (2) and (3), with 3 repetitions per condition selected from 12 lexical sets, plus 64 fillers. In a forced choice task, participants identified the referent of the sluice. The order of antecedent subject and object was controlled. Participants could choose between first referent, second referent, both, or neither.

Results. Figure 1 shows the proportions of responses. A binomial logistic regression revealed an interaction between E-SITE and DEFINITENESS ($z = -2.46$, $p = 0.01$), with participants most likely to choose the object in the isomorphic conditions, supporting H1. In contrast, when the analysis was restricted to NOM-marked sluices which are only compatible with a copular clause, DEFINITENESS emerges as a significant factor ($z = 3.89$, $p < 0.01$). That is, participants choose the antecedent object for NOM-sluices if the subject is definite, supporting H2.

Discussion. The results show that sluices can only refer to indefinite correlates, as predicted by Dayal and Schwarzschild (2010). When both subject and object are indefinite, case marking on the sluice determines its referent. Crucially, if the subject is definite and the sluice bears NOM-case, a conflict arises: NOM-marking forces a copular clausal E-site, but referring to a definite subject causes semantic incongruence. Participants then prefer the indefinite object as the sluice's referent. This suggests that avoiding semantic incongruence can license copular clauses as E-site as a 'last resort' strategy. This contributes a key insight to the literature on ellipsis structure: both semantic and syntactic pressures can force a non-isomorphic ellipsis structure.

Examples

(1) John kissed someone but I don't know…
a. who$_1$ John kissed t_1. b. who$_1$ that was t_1. (highlighting represents ellipsis)

(2) Paul hat einen der Praktikanten gelobt, aber ich weiß nicht…
Paul.NOM has one.ACC of interns praised but I know not
'Paul praised one of the interns, but I don't know…'

a. welchen$_1$ Paul hat t_1 gelobt. *isomorphic, definite*
which.one.**ACC** Paul has praised
'which one (Paul praised).'

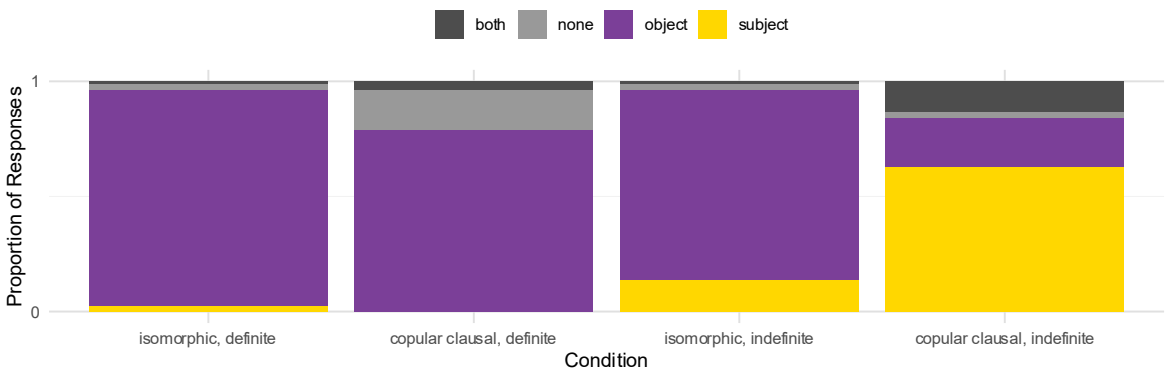
b. welcher$_1$ das war t_1. *copular clausal, definite*
which.one.**NOM** that was
'which one (that was).'

(3) Einer der Mitarbeiter hat einen der Praktikanten gelobt, aber ich weiß nicht...
one.NOM of employees has one.ACC of interns praised but I know not
'One of the employees praised one of the interns, but I don't know…'

c. welchen$_1$ einer der Mitarbeiter hat t_1 gelobt. *isomorphic, indefinite*
which.one.**ACC** one of employees has praised
'which one (one of the employees praised).'

d. welcher$_1$ das war t_1. *copular clausal, indefinite*
which.one.**NOM** that was
'which one (that was).'

Figure 1



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