# Left Branch Extraction and Clausal Ellipsis: An Experimental Approach

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**Background.** Configurations such as 0 have received much attention in the literature that adopts a 'move-and-delete' approach to clausal ellipsis (Merchant 2001, 2004). If ellipsis sites must be syntactically isomorphic to their antecedents (as 0 suggests), then 0 violates the Left Branch Condition (LBC, Ross 1967), and therefore one must stipulate that ellipsis 'repairs' the unacceptability typical induced by crossing an island (as 0 would be unacceptable if ellipsis did not apply). However, if an ellipsis site can be syntactically non-isomorphic to its antecedent, then the ellipsis site for 0 could be a copular clause, in which no left branch extraction occurs (2). If this so-called 'island evasion' approach (Barros et al. 2014) is correct, then the notion that ellipsis can sometimes repair islands is unnecessary. To capture (3)'s unacceptability, Barros (2012) and Griffiths (2019) propose that the presence of contrastive focus forces one to interpret the ellipsis as isomorphic to its antecedent, which yields an island effect if the remnant's correlate in the antecedent is itself island-bound, as transpires in (3).

Much of the 'island repair versus island evasion' debate has centred on English and relies on informally collected acceptability judgments. This is not ideal, because it means that the debate currently rests on subtle lexical-semantic comparisons (see e.g. the renowned '*hard worker*' example in Barros et al. 2014:13) for which informal methods of data collection are unreliable. The purpose of the current study is to address this issue by adopting a more robust data-collection method – namely, controlled acceptability judgment experiments – and by examining the difference between configurations such as (2) and (3) in a language that exhibits a morphological distinction between attributive and predicative adjectives, namely German.

**Experiments.** In German, attributive adjectives are morphologically declined, whereas predicative adjectives are morphologically bare. Therefore, the structure of the ellipsis site can be identified from the morphological form of the adjective in the remnant (*ceteris paribus*). If the adjective is declined, then the ellipsis site must be isomorphic, as the adjective must have originated inside an NP (4B). Conversely, if the adjective is bare, then the ellipsis site must be a copular clause, as the adjective is a predicate (4B′). Exp1 tested the '*groß* versus *großen*' distinction in (4) in non-*wh* fragment answers, where the remnant was either presentationally or contrastively focused. Thus, the experiment tested the two crossed factors ADJECTIVE (*bare* vs. *case marked*) and FOCUS (*presentational* vs. *contrastive*), where contrastive focus arises by the use of *nein* 'no' and the use of an adjective correcting the antecedent adjective. We hypothesize that modulating the presence of contrastive focus on the remnant effects judgments only when the adjective in the remnant is bare. This hypothesis arises from the fact that two opposing forces should be at play: the bare adjective is only compatible with the copular clausal ellipsis site, whereas contrast on the remnant forces one to interpret the ellipsis site as isomorphic (at least according to Barros et al. 2014 and Griffiths 2019). Exp1's four conditions are exemplified in (5). Participants saw 3 repetitions per condition, selected from 12 lexical sets, organized into a 4-list Latin square, with a 2:1 ratio of standardized fillers to test items. Participants rated the naturalness of speaker B's answer on a 1-7 Likert-type scale, where 1 = fully unnatural and 7 = fully natural. 32 monolingual German speakers were sourced via *Prolific* (online, unsupervised). Figure 1 shows that bare adjectival remnants, which are compatible with only copular clause ellipsis sites, are significantly degraded when contrastively focused, whereas case-marked adjectives are less affected by FOCUS. The effect of FOCUS ($t = -7.41$, $p < 0.01$) and crucially, the interaction between FOCUS and ADJECTIVE ($t = 3.67$, $p < 0.01$) are significant, which aligns with our hypothesis. The main effect of ADJECTIVE is found to be insignificant ($t = 0.76$, $p = 0.46$), contrary to the island-evasion approach's predictions. Exp2 was identical in set-up to the Exp1 but instead included only *wh*-remnants, e.g. *B: Wie jung*(*en*)*?* 'How young?'. Figure 2 shows that bare adjectival *wh*-remnants are rated higher than case-marked ones ($t = 6.74$, $p < 0.01$), indicating a preference for a copular clausal ellipsis site, as predicted.

**Discussion.** The 'island evasion' approach successfully captures our results aside from one finding, namely that presentational adjectival non-*wh* remnants appear to be island-insensitive, whereas their *wh*-counterparts appear to be island-sensitive. We will argue that this shortcoming arises from situating the island-evasion approach within the broader 'move-and-delete' framework, and that when an in-situ approach to clausal ellipsis is adopted (e.g., Griffiths 2019, Stigliano 2022), the island-evasion approach can readily account for this difference.

**Examples**

(1) A: Sue married a tall man.
B: Yes, [very tall]$_1$ <she married [$_{island}$ a $t_1$ man]>. (chevrons = ellipsis)

(2) A: Sue married a tall man.
B: Yes, [very tall]$_1$ <he is $t_1$>. (adapted from Griffiths 2019:5)

(3) A: Sue married a TALL man.
B: * No, SHORT$_1$ <she married [$_{island}$ a $t_1$ man]>. (cf. Merchant 2004: ex. (89))

(4) A: Lena hat einen großen Mann geheiratet.
Lena has a.ACC tall.ACC man.ACC married
'Lena married a tall man.'
B: Ja, [sehr großen]$_1$ <Lena hat [$_{island}$ einen $t_1$ Mann] geheiratet>. *isomorphic clause*
B′: Ja, [sehr groß]$_1$ <er ist $t_1$>. *copular clause*
yes very tall he is.
'Yes, very tall.'

(5) A: Der Student hat einen schlechten Aufsatz geschrieben.
the student has a.ACC bad.ACC essay written
'The student has written a bad essay.'
B: Ja, sehr schlecht. *presentational, bare*
yes very bad
'Yes, very bad.'
B′: Ja, sehr schlechten. *presentational, case marked*
yes very bad.ACC
'Yes, very bad.'
B″: Nein, GUT. *contrastive, bare*
no good
'No, GOOD.'
B‴: Nein, GUTEN. *contrastive, case marked*
no good.ACC
'No, GOOD.'

**Figure 1.** Mean ratings for adjectival non-*wh* remnants (Exp1; 95% CIs)

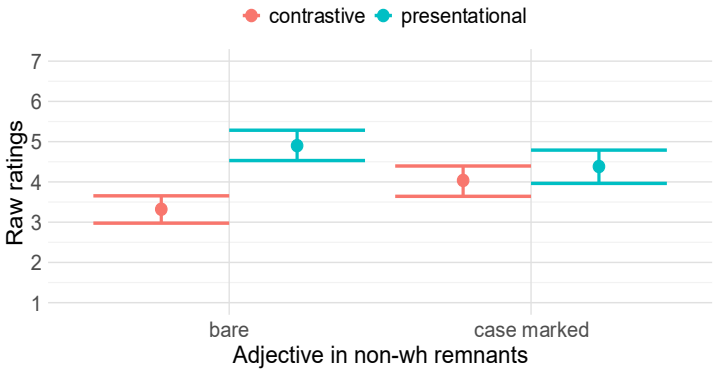
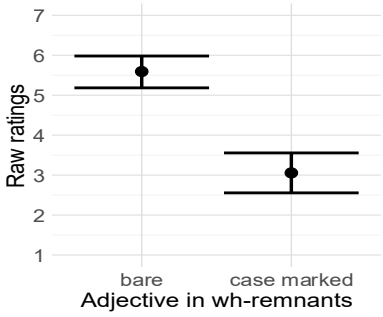



**Figure 2.** Mean ratings for adjectival *wh*-remnants (Exp2; 95% CIs)



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