

Sluicing: Antecedence and the Landscape of Mismatch

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This paper introduces a dataset of 4700 instances of sluicing, prepared by the [Santa Cruz Ellipsis Project](#). In size and in the sophistication of its annotation-scheme, the corpus is, we believe, unprecedented. In this abstract we examine some emerging results from this project, which, we argue, present fundamental challenges for all current theories of sluicing. We sketch a new approach to account for these facts.

Each example is annotated with five obligatory tags: (i) the ANTECEDENT, (ii) the WH-remnant, (iii) a plain-text paraphrase of the elided content, (iv) the MAIN PREDICATE of the antecedent clause, and (v) the CORRELATE of the WH-remnant, if there is one. Furthermore, each example is annotated for ways in which the paraphrase of the sluice differs in form and in interpretation from its antecedent. We focus on such mismatches and highlight three important sub-types.

Modal Mismatch: 694 examples are annotated with the MODAL feature, which indicates that the paraphrase of the sluice contains a modal verb not present in the antecedent, as in (1). No particular modal is specified in the paraphrase; rather the symbol MODAL indicates that a modal of some kind is needed.¹

- (1) Texas A&M coach Tony Barone unabashedly predicted that ... [the Aggies could be better than a year ago]. He just forgot to say when. <the Aggies MODAL be better than a year ago> [88489]

Polarity: There are 27 cases in which the antecedent clause and the elided clause differ in polarity. In some examples, such as (2), the polarity of the sluice is positive, and the antecedent negative, while in other examples, like (3), the switch in polarity is in the opposite direction.

- (2) “[Coach O’Leary doesn’t do things] without letting you know why <Coach O’Leary DID THOSE things>,” Hamilton said. [99992]
- (3) “I don’t think [Steve Jobs will let it be a boring MacWorld],” Reynolds said. “We just don’t know how <Steve Jobs will let it be NOT a boring MacWorld>.” [111174]

New Words: This tag indicates that the paraphrase of the ellipsis site contains lexical material not found in the antecedent. Along with the more specific options described above, concerning modality and polarity, it provides a way of assessing Chung’s (2005) influential generalization that ellipsis sites and their antecedents are constructed from the same lexical resources. 160 instances are so marked, the novel material indicated by upper case. In 23 examples the only structure which is shared between antecedent and ellipsis-site is a nominal phrase (which we take to be DP). But the interpretation of the sluice implies a copular structure in the ellipsis site; the remnant WH-phrase supplies the predicate for that copular structure and the antecedent DP provides its subject, as in (4).

- (4) Bradley said that he has not shut the door to [a presidential race], though he would not say when <that presidential race MODAL BE>. [176498]

There is a notable sub-group of this type (represented by 17 examples) in which the ellipsis site expresses an existential proposition but in which, again, the only structure shared by the ellipsis site and the antecedent context is a nominal – an indefinite which serves as pivot in the existential of the ellipsis site, as seen in (5):

- (5) [A cut] appears almost certain this year; the question is how soon <THERE MODAL BE a cut>, and by how much <THERE MODAL BE a cut>. [15811]

These are the copular ‘non-isomorphic’ sluices of recent discussions (Vicente 2019).

The ‘new word’ within the ellipsis site is, in at least 17 cases, a stranded preposition which violates Chung’s Generalization in having no counterpart in the antecedent, as in (6).

- (6) a. ‘Hey, you work at Salomon? I have a friend who works at Salomon.’ ‘Really? What group <DOES THAT friend work at Salomon IN>?’ [105278]
- b. “The first thing he said was so interesting that [he thought it was a period piece],” Scardino recalled. “I said ‘What period <do you think it is a piece FROM>?’ He said, ‘Nineteen ninety-one.’” [195676]

¹In all examples, the antecedent is marked with square brackets, and the ellipsis paraphrase with angle brackets.

Missing mismatches: An important class of mismatch does not appear at all - we found no cases showing argument structure mismatch; for example, no antecedent-ellipsis site pairings in which one was active and the other passive, or in which one was transitive and the other inchoative. We found exceptions to Chung’s Generalization for adjunct prepositions but not for selected prepositions.

Rudin’s Proposal: Rudin (2018) proposes a requirement of syntactic identity in sluicing that applies to the *vP* of the ellipsis site and an antecedent *vP*. This proposal was largely motivated by the facts about polarity and modal mismatch reported above. However, Rudin’s proposal must be modified, since, as we saw in (4) and (5) above, antecedents for sluicing need not have any verbal material at all.

(7) SYNTACTIC ISOMORPHISM CONDITION

- a. The TP-complement of WH-C may be elided only if it is the extended projection (in the sense of Grimshaw (91) of an argument domain – XP – which meets the condition in b.:
- b. There is a phrase YP in the discourse context, such that for each head *x* targeted for elision within XP, there is a head *y* in YP, *x* and *y* are tokens of the same lexical item and are dominated within XP and YP by identical series of immediately dominating heads.

Given (7), we can treat the copular clause cases in which the interpretation of the sluice suggests the presence of a predicative copula structure in the ellipsis-site, but in which there is no sign of a copular structure anywhere in the antecedent context. We consider three sub-types, represented by the examples in (8):

- (8) a. [Toph], now 16 and [a high school student] (Eggers won’t say where <Toph is a high school student>) ... is in the room next door, [47210]
- b. [A cut] appears almost certain this year; the question is how soon <THERE MODAL BE a cut> [15811]
- c. Bradley said that he has not shut the door to [a presidential race], though he would not say when <that presidential race MODAL BE>. [176498]

Following the general framework of Mikkelsen (05), we assume that *be* in most of its uses takes a small clause complement. The elided clauses in (8) will then have the skeletal pre-movement and pre-elision structures in (9):

- (9) a. [TP T be [SC Toph [a high school student]] [PP where]]
- b. [TP T be [SC a cut [how soon]]]
- c. [TP T be [SC a presidential race [PP when]]]

In these cases, the relevant argument domain is the small clause complement of *be*. For the case in (9-a), both the subject and the predicate of the small clause have counterparts in the antecedent context. But in the remaining two examples, only the subject of the small clause has such a counterpart. The crucial difference between the two sets of cases is that in (9-b) and in (9-c) the predicate of the small clause has undergone WH-movement out of the ellipsis site and is therefore not required to be matched in the antecedent context. These are instances of sprouting.

Many questions remain then, but (7) seems to cover all of the observations considered here. Rudin’s proposal is that sluicing is governed by an identity condition that applies only to the *vP* – that is, something smaller than the entire elided material. Our proposal is to take this a step farther – the identity condition can target any XP that constitutes an argument domain, and we have shown that this must not be restricted to *vP*. This conflicts with a common-sense assumption that ellipsis requires an antecedent of the same category as the elided phrase. We note that it has been clear for many years (Rooth 1992, Fiengo and May 1994) that VP-ellipsis depends on a parallelism domain that is *larger* than the elided phrase. Here we explore the mirror-image possibility – that sluicing depends on a constituent which is *smaller* than the elided phrase, while the recovery of a suitable interpretation for the elided constituent engages discourse-level properties like givenness, salience, and coherence.

Selected References: Chung, S. (2006) Sluicing and the lexicon: The point of no return. Berkeley Linguistics Society ★ Mikkelsen, L. (2005) Copular clauses: Specification, predication and equation. ★ Rudin, D. (2019) Head-based syntactic identity in sluicing. Linguistic Inquiry ★ Vicente, L. (2019) Sluicing and its subtypes. The Oxford handbook of ellipsis.