

Focus Constraints on Ellipsis — An Unalternatives Account

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This paper presents a new account of the focus-ellipsis generalization, (1), within Un- alternative Semantics (UAS, see Büring, 2015, 2016a,b); our proposal does not use F- or G-markers, and, as an added bonus, accounts for MaxElide effects without using transderivational constraints.

(1) The FOCUS–ELLIPSIS GENERALIZATION (FEG): Focal elements cannot be elided.

FEG is illustrated in (2)/(3): Even though *kiss* need not bear a pitch accent in a VP focus answer like (3-a), and can in principle be elided alongside the subject+aux, (2-a), such elision is impossible when VP is the (answer) focus, as in (3-c); instead, only the non-focal subject can be elided, (3-b).

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|-----|--------------------------------|-----|--------------------------------|
| (2) | (Who was Kim going to kiss?) — | (3) | (What was Kim going to do?) |
| | a. ALEX. | | a. Kim was going to kiss ALEX. |
| | b. Kim was going to kiss ALEX. | | b. Kiss ALEX. |
| | | | c. #ALEX. |

It is straightforward to turn (1) into a grammatical constraint, but as the contrast between (2-a) and (3-c) demonstrates, such a constraint would have to refer to the notion of F-marking, rather than, say, accenting. This in turn seems incompatible with Unalternative Semantics, or any other theory that aims to eliminate the need for F-marking.

FEG in Unalternative Semantics A central goal of UAS is to ‘cut out the middle man’ in the common *accenting/stress* \leftrightarrow *F-marking* \leftrightarrow *F-alternatives* picture, by attaching constraints on the availability of focus alternatives directly to independently needed aspects of the grammatical representation, such as metrical weight (stress). A typical example is the UAS constraint for prosodic reversal (‘deaccenting’), paraphrased in (4).

- (4) If between two sister nodes $[_C A B]$ (order irrelevant) A is metrically *s* (and B *w*), then,
- a. if $A_s B_w$ is not the metrical default for C, C only allows f-alternatives in which
 - (i) the meaning of B is invariable in all focus alternatives, and
 - (ii) the literal meaning of A is not in any focus alternative
 - b. else, C allows all focus alternative except those in (a).

(4-a) expresses that $[_{VP} KISS Alex]$ (the metrical default for which would be *kiss ALEX*), admits of alternatives like ‘see Alex’, ‘greet Alex’, but not ‘swim’, ‘see John’ or ‘kiss Alex’; whereas by (4-b), *kiss ALEX* (=default) admits of any alternative except those like ‘see Alex’, ‘greet Alex’ etc. No mention of F-marking is required (see again Büring (2015), Büring (2016b) for details).

If the FEG (1) is sensitive to the abstract F-feature, rather than prosodic weight, UAS has to find a different way to express it. The present paper does so utilizing two other core features of UAS: That the availability of focus alternatives is constrained cumulatively and *ex negativo*, and that constraints may in principle be attached to other grammatical features than stress/metrical weight (which is crucial in languages that realize focus in other ways than prosodically). Concretely, ellipsis itself imposes a constraint on the available focus alternatives, namely that the elided constituent does not introduce alternatives.

- (5) Ellipsis constraint: If between two sister nodes $[_C A B]$, A is prosodically realized, but B is not,
- a. the meaning of B is invariable in all focus alternatives of C, and
 - b. the literal meaning of A is not in any focus alternative of C

Applied to (3), represented Merchant (2001)-style in (6), (5) derives that alternatives must be of the kind ‘ $x(\neq \text{Alex})$, Kim was going to kiss’, which matches the question in (2), but not in (3).

(6) [[_A Alex]_B ~~Kim was going to kiss~~]

The FEG is thus captured, not as F-marking constraining ellipsis, but as ellipsis constraining focus alternatives.

MaxElide Effects (5) imposes the same restrictions on alternatives that (4-a) does. To block (3-c), the first clause, (5-a), would have sufficed, blocking alternatives to *kissed*. Including (5-b), however, allows us to moreover capture so-called MaxElide effects Merchant (2008); Takahashi and Fox (2005).

- (7) The feds discovered a number of our bugs, but we don’t know
- a. how many/which
 - b. *how many/which they did [_Bdiscover]
 - c. which they didn’t
 - d. which/how many the CIA did.

(7-b), by not including *they did* in the ellipsis, signals, that the literal meaning of *they did* (=A in the sense of (5-b)) is not among the focus alternatives of the ellipsis site, contrary to fact. If, on the other hand, the subject or the aux (here interpreted as polarity) are different, the smaller ellipsis is possible, in fact necessary: (7-c/d).

We thus derive an analysis of the MaxElide effect that does not require transderivational comparison of different ellipsis sizes; furthermore, it follows immediately that . . . *we don’t know how many/which the feds discovered*, with no ellipsis at all, is acceptable alongside the maximally ellided (7-a): (5) is only invoked in an ellipsis structure, and has no consequences for sentences without ellipsis. A *bona fide* MAXELIDE constraint always has to include a story as to why, given a constraint that seeks to maximize ellipsis, the possibility of ellipsis like in (7-a) wouldn’t block a non-elliptical structure altogether.

In sum, our proposal implements the FEG without reference to syntactic F-markers, and simultaneously derives MaxElide effects, all using the general format of Unalternative Semantics. Further issues to be discussed in the full paper include i) the treatment of apparent exceptions to MaxElide in non-extraction structures (to be analyzed using embedded focal structure) and ii) a derivation of why *kiss ALEX* is an impossible ellipsis answer to (2) (which should be a MaxElide effect but doesn’t follow from what was said above, since certain assumptions about (covert) focus movement have not been spelled out).

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