

Feng Chia University

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Psychological Reality of VP Ellipsis

動詞刪除句在心理上的真實性

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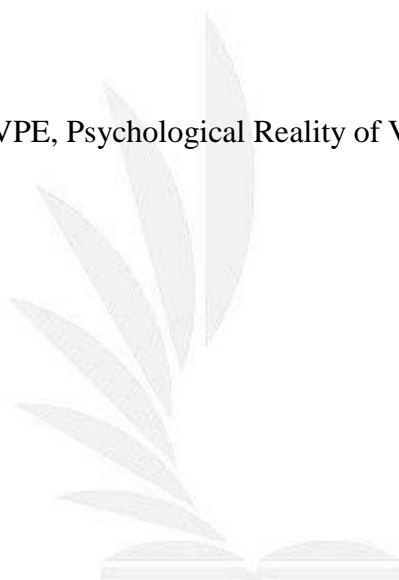
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Abstract

This essay aims to discuss whether VP (verb phrase) ellipsis is psychologically real and what kinds of sentences where VP ellipsis occurs are the most acceptable by English speakers. Also known as “VPE”, VP ellipsis is an elliptical construction in which a non-finite verb phrase has been elided, e.g. “Marry smiled. Tina did [] too.” In the linguistics literature, VP ellipsis has been studied extensively and two sharply contrasting approaches to VP ellipsis phenomena exist. One approach is syntactic, and the other is semantic. This paper looks into verb phrase ellipsis by comparing two papers: “On-Line Comprehension of VP-Ellipsis: Syntactic Reconstruction and Semantic Influence” and “Processing elided verb phrases with flawed antecedents: The recycling hypothesis.” This comparison helps people know the psychological reality of VP ellipsis and also understand English speakers’ acceptability when VP ellipsis occurs in different sentence forms.

Keyword : VP ellipsis, VPE, Psychological Reality of VP Ellipsis



中文摘要

本文旨在探討動詞刪除句在心理上的真實性，此外，在探討分析動詞刪除句的同時，將進一步了解動詞刪除句出現在何種句型，較能夠被英語為母語人士所接受。本文共分成六個段落，第一段將回顧文獻，簡略了解動詞刪除句在語言學中被探討的情形與方向；第二段則簡述本文寫作的原因及內文大綱；第三與四段將依序概述兩篇文章：〈動詞刪除句的在線理解：句法重構與語義影響〉(“On-Line Comprehension of VP-Ellipsis: Syntactic Reconstruction and Semantic Influence”)與〈處理帶有缺陷又省略動詞片語的先行詞：循環假設〉(“Processing elided verb phrases with flawed antecedents: The recycling hypothesis.”)；第五段則透過比較這兩篇文章，證實動詞刪除句在心理上的真實性，並論述母語人士接受不同動詞刪除句的程度；最後一段將總結此篇文章。

關鍵詞：動詞刪除句、動詞刪除句在心理上的真實性



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Psychological Reality of VP Ellipsis

Literature Review

Ana Arregui, Charles Clifton Jr., Lyn Frazier, and Keir Moulton's "Processing elided verb phrases with flawed antecedents: The recycling hypothesis" mainly focuses on the relationship between flawed antecedents and VP ellipsis. The paper of Arregui et al examines five acceptability judgment experiments to support a "VP recycling hypothesis," which claims that when a syntactically matching antecedent is not available, the listener/reader creates one by using the materials at hand. Lyn Frazier and Charles Clifton, Jr. also explore ellipsis through syntactic approaches. In "PARSING COORDINATES AND ELLIPSIS: COPY α ," Frazier and Clifton look into varieties of ellipsis, such as sluicing, VP ellipsis and *either-or* to discuss the relationship between antecedents and ellipsis. Frazier and Clifton suggest that the difficulty of comprehending the ellipsis structures is not affected by the syntactic complexity of the elided material, as it should be if the elided material had to be built from scratch, inference by inference. As a result, Frazier and Clifton argue that the missing syntactic complexity effects can be explained by assuming a cost-free structure-copying mechanism, which they call Copy α .

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss whether VP (verb phrase) ellipsis is psychologically real and whether English speakers can accept when VP ellipsis occurs in different kinds of sentences. As an English learner, I was amazed and didn't believe that "VP ellipsis" is psychologically real until the teacher showed me the results of experiments. This situation also happens in linguistics studies. Some people believe the reality of VP ellipsis while others don't. As a result, in order to persuade those people who don't believe the reality of VP ellipsis, some linguists conduct experiments to prove that VP ellipsis is psychologically real. For such a reason, this paper examines VP ellipsis by comparing two papers: "On-Line Comprehension of VP-Ellipsis: Syntactic Reconstruction and Semantic Influence" and "Processing elided verb phrases with flawed antecedents: The recycling hypothesis." Through this comparison, people can know how linguists carry out their experiments to prove the psychological reality of VP ellipsis and also understand whether English speakers can accept when VP ellipsis occurs in different kinds of sentences.

In the first part of this paper, I will summarize the experiments of Lewis P. Shapiro and Arild Hestvik's "On-Line Comprehension of VP-Ellipsis: Syntactic Reconstruction and Semantic Influence." This summary will indicate how Shapiro and Hestvik design and carry out their experiments. In the second part, I will summarize

the experiments of the other paper “Processing elided verb phrases with flawed antecedents: The recycling hypothesis” written by Ana Arregui, Charles Clifton Jr., Lyn Frazier, and Keir Moulton. On the basis of what I summarize, I will compare the two papers in the third part. Through this comparison, I will tell readers which paper is more convincing. As a result, readers could understand the psychological reality of VP ellipsis because it is examined by actual experiments. According to the comparison, I will conclude that VP ellipsis is psychologically real. Moreover, I will show readers English speakers’ acceptability of VP ellipsis when VP ellipsis occurs in different sentences on the basis of Arregui et al.’s experiments.

Summary of On-Line Comprehension of VP-Ellipsis: Syntactic Reconstruction and Semantic Influence

Lewis P. Shapiro and Arild Hestvik discuss VP ellipsis from syntactic and semantic approaches. They combine these two approaches to make two on-line experiments.

In Shapiro and Hestvik’s paper “On-Line Comprehension of VP-Ellipsis: Syntactic Reconstruction and Semantic Influence” they first mention two kinds of readings, sloppy reading and strict reading, to explain readers’ different interpretations when they read sentences with VP ellipsis. For example, in sloppy reading, the

sentence “The policeman defended himself and the fireman did [] too, according to someone who was there” is interpreted as “the fireman defend himself (the fireman).” On the contrary, in strict reading, the sentence is interpret as “the fireman defend him (the policeman).”

After explaining the difference between sloppy reading and strict reading, Shapiro and Hestvik say, “We chose the strict reading as our initial focus because it has been observed that it is often the most difficult interpretation to generate off-line” (520). The above statement explains the reason why Shapiro and Hestvik’s experiments are on-line because off-line experiments cannot precisely measure the process of strict reading. In such a case, Shapiro and Hestvik further carry out two experiments, coordinated ellipsis and subordinated ellipsis, to examine how VP ellipsis affects readers’ response times when VP ellipsis occurs in coordinate sentences and subordinate sentences. According to the results of their experiments, they find that immediate reaccess of the nonlocal subject at the gap occurs in coordination. However, in subordinated structures, they find the effect only down-stream from the gap.

Summary of Processing Elided Verb Phrases with Flawed Antecedents: The Recycling Hypothesis

What Ana Arregui, Charles Clifton Jr., Lyn Frazier, and Keir Moulton do in their paper is similar to what Shapiro and Hestvik do. In “Processing elided verb phrases with flawed antecedents: The recycling hypothesis,” Arregui et al. also use experiments to support their assumption.

By five acceptability judgement experiments, Arregui et al. support a “VP recycling hypothesis,” which claims that when a syntactically matching antecedent is not available, the listener/reader creates one by using the materials at hand. In experiments 1 and 2, Arregui et al. use verb phrase ellipsis sentences with antecedents ranging from perfect (a verb phrase in matrix verb position) to impossible (a verb phrase containing only a deverbal word). They categorize sentences into four forms: available verb phrase, embedded verb phrase, verb phrase with trace, and negative adjective. To further test the recycling hypothesis, in experiments 3 and 4, Arregui et al. look into antecedents in verbal and nominal gerund subjects. Experiment 1 and 3 are on-line acceptability judgments while experiments 2 and 4 are off-line to examine acceptability judgments of sentences used in experiment 1 and 3. Moreover, in experiment 5, Arregui et al. aim to explore the possibility that speakers are particularly likely to go beyond the grammar and produce elided constituents without perfect matching antecedents when the antecedent needed is less marked than the antecedent actually produced. They mention that in 1963 Mehler have indicated

“Actives and passives provide a good test for the systematic paraphrase hypothesis since it is already known that listeners are more likely to mis-recall a passive as an active than to mis-recall an active as a passive” (240). On the basis of this reason, in experiment 5, Arregui et al. decide to contrast active and passive antecedents to show that readers seem to honor such a tendency.

Comparison and Contrast

From Shapiro and Hestvik’s paper and Arregui et al.’s paper, I agree that VP ellipsis is psychologically real because they both explore VP ellipsis through designing experiments and the respective results suggest the reality of VP ellipsis. However, when I closely look into the experiments designed in these two papers, I find that Arregui et al.’s paper is more convincing because there is a problem of Shapiro and Hestvik’s experiment.

As I mentioned earlier in summary of Shapiro and Hestvik’s paper, Shapiro and Hestvik give the reason why they choose on-line experiments because off-line experiments cannot precisely measure the process of strict reading. Nevertheless, there exists a logical problem. How could Shapiro and Hestvik know that readers must use strict reading while doing on-line experiments? In other words, it would be possible that readers can use sloppy reading when Shapiro and Hestvik carry out their

experiments. Besides, scrutinizing Shapiro and Hestvik' paper, I cannot find the evidence that people use strict reading while Shapiro and Hestvik conduct their experiments. Basing on these two reasons, I cannot agree with Shapiro and Hestvik because they give an illogical assumption. Therefore, I suggest that they should add a comprehension experiment before they explore coordinated ellipsis and subordinated ellipsis.

Compared Shapiro and Hestvik's experiment design with Arregui et al.'s, there is no illogical assumption in Arregui et al.'s paper. Besides, Arregui et al. use more comprehensive ways to support their hypothesis. Experiments 1 and 2 use verb phrase ellipsis sentences with antecedents ranging from perfect (a verb phrase in matrix verb position) to impossible (a verb phrase containing only a deverbal word). Experiments 3 and 4 contract antecedent in verbal and nominal subjects. Experiment 5 explore active and passive antecedents. In addition, some of the experiments are on-line and some are off-line. Therefore, their experiments are more comprehensive.

As a result, by reading Arregui et al.'s paper, readers can know the psychological reality of VP ellipsis and understand English speakers' acceptability of VP ellipsis when VP ellipsis occurs in different kinds of sentences. For example, from their paper, readers can comprehend three situations of acceptability when VP ellipsis occurs. First, when VP ellipsis occurs in sentences with available verb phrases is more acceptable

than with embedded verb phrases, verb phrases with trace, and negative adjectives.

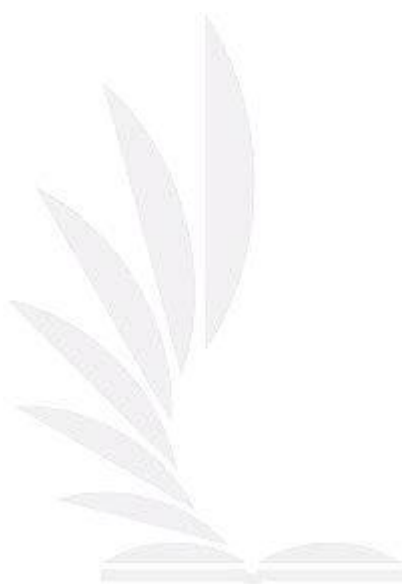
The above result is based on what Arregui et al. mention “The results support the VP recycling hypothesis. When the processor postulates an empty verb phrase, it looks for a verb phrase antecedent, beginning with salient or focused verb phrases in the expected position for a verb phrase.” (236). Second, when VP ellipsis occurs in sentences with a verbal gerund is more acceptable than that with a nominal ground.

This statement is according to what Arregui et al. conclude “The principal result of Experiment 3 is very clear: elliptical sentences with a verbal gerund as the presumed antecedent of a verbal ellipsis are more acceptable than sentences with a nominal gerund” (238). Finally, an active VP ellipsis follow a passive antecedent is more acceptable than a passive VP ellipsis follow an active antecedent. As Arregui et al. declare, “Specifically, passive antecedent plus active elided verb phrase should be more acceptable than active antecedent plus passive elided verb phrase.” (240).

In a nutshell, not only according to the logical assumption of Arregui et al.’s paper but also according to the abundant data and complete experiments, these are the reasons why I think Arregui et al.’s paper is more convincing than Shapiro and Hestvik’s.

Conclusion

To sum up, by scrutinizing and comparing Shapiro and Hestvik's paper and Arregui et al.'s, people know the psychological reality of VP ellipsis and understand English speakers' acceptability of VP ellipsis when VP ellipsis occurs in different kinds of sentences.



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