

Ellipsis in the Syntax of Alternative Questions

In this paper, we argue that the syntax of alternative (alt-) questions involves ellipsis. Three arguments are presented: (i) alt-questions require a particular Focus pattern in the disjuncts, a fact that follows naturally in an ellipsis account; (ii) certain asymmetries between *whether/Q...or* and *either...or* are resolved, permitting for an extension of Schwarz' (1999) ellipsis account of *either...or* to alt-questions; and (iii) crosslinguistic data on the surface string syntax of Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) languages support the ellipsis account.

Focus intonation has the disambiguating effect in non-*wh*-questions containing disjunction (*whether/Q...or* constructions). A (written) question such as *Did John drink coffee or tea?* has, in principle, two potential readings: the *yes/no* (*yn*-)question reading in (1) and the alt-question reading in (2) (see Karttunen (1977), Larson (1985), Higginbotham (1993) on the semantics of alternative questions). However, as noted in Romero (1998), Focus intonation disambiguates the two readings: the *yn*-reading presents neutral intonation on the disjunctive phrase, as in (3a), whereas the alt-reading is achieved by placing Focus stress on each disjunct, as in (3b).

- (1) a. *Yn*-reading: "Is it the case that John drank any of these two things, coffee or tea?"
b. Answer 1: Yes, John drank coffee or tea. c. Answer 2: No, John didn't either.
- (2) a. Alt-reading: "Which of these two things did John drink: coffee or tea?"
b. Answer 1: John drank coffee. c. Answer 2: John drank tea.
- (3) a. Did John drink coffee or tea? (neutral intonation, *yn*-reading only)
b. Did John drink COFfee or TEA? (Focus in capitals, alt-reading only)

We propose that alt-questions involve ellipsis and that this double Focus is simply the typical contrastive Focus on the remnant (*TEA*) and its correlate (*COFfee*). Hence, the LF of (3b) is (4):

- (4) Did John drink COFfee or ~~did he drink~~ TEA?

Our analysis of *whether/Q...or* matches nicely Schwarz's (1999) ellipsis analysis of *either...or*. According to Schwarz, in *either...or* constructions, *either* marks the left periphery of the first disjunct, and some materials in the second disjunct are deleted under identity with the first disjunct, as in (5).

- (5) Either John ate rice or beans.
either [*IP* John ate rice] or [*IP* ~~John ate~~ beans].

Schwarz however did not extend his ellipsis account to *whether/Q...or* constructions because of the following asymmetries. First, unbalanced ellipsis is marginal in *either...or* but perfect in *whether/Q...or* constructions, as shown in (6). Second, eliding across a finite embedded clause boundary results in marginality for *either...or* but it yields grammaticality for *whether/Q...or*: (7).

But note that the corresponding *either...or* constructions in which *either* is lower in the clause are well-formed: (8). We point out that *whether/Q* is a *wh*-phrase, while *either* is not, and claim that *whether/Q* can undergo *wh*-movement, as in Larson (1985). Thus, the trace of *whether* corresponds to the surface position of *either*. This implies that as long as there is a grammatical source sentence with *either*, the corresponding *whether* sentence should be fine. The LF corresponding to the alt-questions are given in (9)-(10). Also, if *whether* undergoes movement, then its originating position cannot be inside an island. This prediction is borne out (Larson 1985): (11).

Languages that have SOV word order provide further evidence that the syntax of alt-questions involve ellipsis. In Hindi, if a non-*wh*-question like *Did Chandra drink coffee or tea?* has a *yn*-question reading, *coffee or tea* is instantiated as an NP disjunct in the object position, as in (12a). If it has an alt-question reading, *coffee* and *tea* are separated by the verb *drink*, and *coffee* is the object of the first disjunctive clause, and *tea* occurs alone in the second disjunct where the subject and the verb have been elided, as in (12b).

Similar facts obtain in Korean. A non-*wh*-question containing a disjunctive phrase such as *coffee or tea* can only have a *yn*-question reading, as in (13a). In order to obtain an alt-question reading, *coffee* must be part of the first disjunctive clause, and *tea* must be part of the second disjunctive clause, as in (13b).

In sum, by arguing that alternative questions involve ellipsis, we have reduced the syntax of *whether/Q...or* constructions to that of *either...or* constructions. Given that *whether* is a *wh*-form of *either*, the syntactic parallelism between the two types of constructions is a welcome result.

- (6) Unbalanced ellipsis
- a. ?? Either this pissed Bill or Sue off.
either [*IP* this pissed Bill ~~off~~] or [*IP* ~~this pissed~~ Sue off]
 - b. Did this piss Bill or Sue off?
Q [*C'* did this piss Bill ~~off~~] or [*C'* ~~did this piss~~ Sue off]
- (7) Ellipsis across matrix and embedded finite clauses:
- a. ?? Either Bill said that John retired or resigned.
either [*IP* Bill said that John retired] or [*IP* ~~Bill said that John~~ resigned]
 - b. Did Bill say that John retired or resigned?
Q [*C'* did Bill say that John retired] or [*C'* ~~did Bill say that John~~ resigned]
- (8)
- a. This either pissed Bill or Sue off.
this either [*VP* pissed Bill t_j] or [*VP* ~~pissed~~ Sue t_j] off $_j$
 - b. Bill said either that John retired or resigned.
Bill said either [*C'* that John retired] or [*C'* ~~that John~~ resigned]
- (9) Did this piss Bill or Sue off?
- a. Q_i did this t_i [*VP* piss Bill t_j] or [*VP* ~~piss~~ Sue t_j] off $_j$
- (10) Did Bill say that John retired or resigned?
- a. Q_i did Bill say t_i [*C'* that John retired] or [*C'* ~~that John~~ resigned]
- (11) Q_i Did John hear [*NP* the news t_i that Bill retired or resigned]? (*alt-reading)
- (12)
- a. Kyaa Chandra-ne **coffee yaa chai** piyaa?
whether Chandra-Erg **coffee or tea** drank
'Is it the case that Chandra drank coffee or tea?' (*yn*-question)
 - b. Kyaa Chandra-ne **coffee** piyaa yaa **chai**?
whether Chandra-Erg **coffee** drank or **tea**
'Which of these two things did Chandra drink: coffee or tea?' (alt-question)
- (13)
- a. Chulswu-ka **kophi-na cha-lul** masi-ess-ni?
Chulswu-Nom **coffee-or tea-Acc** drink-Past-Int
'Is it the case that Chulswu drank coffee or tea?' (*yn*-question)
 - b. Chulswu-ka **kophi-lul** masi-ess-ni **cha-lul** masi-ess-ni?
Chulswu-Nom **coffee-Acc** drink-Past-Int **tea-Acc** drink-Past-Int
'Which of these two things did Chulswu drink: coffee or tea?' (alt-question)

References

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