RETRIEVABILITY and Ellipsis
Workshop on Ellipsis and Philosophy of Language
University of Western Ontario

ABSTRACT: Whenever something is missing in an utterance—there is an anaphoric presupposition to be satisfied or an ellipsis to be interpreted—felicity requires RETRIEVABILITY, i.e. that whatever is missing be something the speaker can reasonably take the addressee to be attending to at the time of utterance. In general, what we attend to is determined by our goals and intentions. In discourse in particular, at any given time cooperative interlocutors can be expected to be attuned to a certain common goal, addressing the question under discussion. I consider the consequences of this view for a variety of elliptical phenomena. I argue that a sub-class of the conventionally triggered ellipsis constructions, including Gapping, VP Ellipsis, and Sluicing, involve anaphoric presuppositions, with a concurrent Scope Constraint on the relation to an antecedent. Combined with the RETRIEVABILITY requirement, this explains a wider range of features of these constructions than theories which attempt to account for them in purely syntactic or syntactico-semantic terms. I then argue that theories that treat definite descriptions and pronouns as syntactically elliptical are on the wrong track, and that the problem of incomplete descriptions in definite NPs is actually a non-problem: If we adopt an independently-motivated theory of definite NPs based on familiarity and informational uniqueness, rather than the classical Russellian existence and semantic uniqueness, and appreciate the way that the requirement of RETRIEVABILITY restricts the search space for familiar antecedents, then in felicitous use of a definite there are no incomplete descriptions, even when the description fails to guarantee semantic uniqueness. Theories motivated by the pseudo-incompleteness problem—including E-type and D-type theories of pronouns in discourse—are both unnecessary and empirically inadequate. To the extent that RETRIEVABILITY proves useful, it is an argument that contextual effects on the determination of the proposition expressed by an utterance cannot be reduced to determining the values of indexicals. But still, those effects are much more restricted than in theories which posit that freely-drawn inferences play a part in the determination of the proposition expressed.

I. Pay attention

How does one know that something is missing?
How does one go about finding what’s missing?

(1) Tim and Margaret are sitting at a conference table in her psycholinguistics lab, working on a grant proposal. Tim is making notes on his Compaq-brand laptop.
Margaret: How do you like your Compaq?
Tim: It’s not bad, but it’s getting kind of old. I wish I had a Mac. Macs are far better for graphics, and it turns out that I’m doing a lot more graphics than I’d expected.
Margaret: [gesturing with her thumb over her shoulder, in the direction of her desk in the middle of the room] I just got [that] last year.
In the direction Margaret is pointing there’s a lot of stuff: a desk with a big pile of papers and a flat screen Dell computer monitor on it, past the desk an eye-tracker, past that a wall calendar.

(2) [Giving directions to a stranger:] After passing through the light at Indianola, go four more blocks, then turn left at the fire station.
(3) naturally occurring example: Ed Keenan is giving a colloquium at the University of Amsterdam. During the talk, he twirls his reading glasses by the stem and the screw holding the stem to the frame falls out, so that the glasses drop to the table. He puts the stem down and continues his talk. At the break, he begins searching intently under the papers on the table.

Craig: It’s probably on the floor.

(4) Two women are standing at a bus stop on a rainy day. A car drives by, through a puddle, splashing one of the women with muddy water. To the splashed woman:

One splashed [me]; this morning, too.

(5) A policeman on the beat turns a corner and sees a young kid with a rock, poised to throw it through the window of a school. The kid doesn’t see him yet: The policeman says:

I wouldn’t if I were you.

(6) A guy is standing in front of a make-shift monument on the sidewalk in front of a house where two neighborhood kids carried out a suicide pact earlier that week. Another neighbor comes up to stand beside him, also silently gazing at the monument. After awhile, one of them says:

I just cannot fathom why.

Basic RETRIEVABILITY: A very simple story about how we retrieve the intended content of elliptical expressions, however they are signaled and licensed:

(a) A speaker can only be reasonably assured that ellipsis will be successful if she can assume that at the time of utterance her interlocutors will be attending to the intended referent, or to something very much like it.

(b) At any given time, what we intend is the central factor in determining what we attend to. Our goals and commitments thus direct our attention.

(c) The exchange of information in a discourse is organized around questions for discussion. The goal of conversation at any given point is to address the question currently under discussion, and there are rational constraints on which questions can be felicitously raised, given what previous questions remain unresolved (Roberts 1996). The upshot of this is that in making an utterance the speaker can reasonably expect that a competent, cooperative addressee who is engaged in the discussion will be attending to the resolution of the question under discussion (a semantic entity—a set of alternatives).

(d) Hence, in a rational interchange the retrieval of what has been omitted is necessarily dependent either on the question under discussion or, if the addressee’s attention is elsewhere, on whatever her evident immediate goals lead her to attend to in that extra-linguistic sphere.

Different question, different interpretation retrieved:

(1’) Margaret: How do you like your Compaq?

Tim: It’s not bad, but it’s getting kind of old. Anyway, let’s get back to business. What do you think of this budget?

Margaret: [gesturing with her thumb toward the middle of the room] Could we add some money to replace that?

Definite descriptions differ from pronouns in not requiring maximal salience:
(7) I dropped ten marbles and found all of them, except for one.
It is probably under the sofa.

(8) I dropped ten marbles and found only nine of them.
?aIt is probably under the sofa.

(9) I dropped ten marbles and found only nine of them.
The missing marble is probably under the sofa.

(3′) [Same scenario, up to the break. But at that point, Keenan absent-mindedly picks up the glasses
stem and plays with it while he chats with an audience member about his talk.]
Craige: #It’s probably on the floor./\The screw is probably on the floor.

2. Ellipsis Recognition and Ellipsis Retrieval

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Conventionally triggered ellipsis
*No associated conventional presupposition; merely conversationally implicated
*Presupposes a (weakly) familiar entity; correlates negatively with Indeterminate sense
*Generally requires an overt antecedent, though exceptions are noted (as in the examples above).

Object ellipsis is indeterminate, lexically governed:
(10) Everyone had expected Jan to win a race, and we were disappointed. But Steve
won, and that helped.
    ‘Steve won a race/the race everyone expected Jan to win’

(11) *Jan tried to protect the sandcastle, but Steve destroyed.
    ‘Steve destroyed the sandcastle’

*How about ellipsis is indeterminate:
(12) A: I’d like to book a hotel room in Columbus, near the arena on Friday, May 20th.
    B: I’m sorry, sir, but there aren’t any rooms available in that area on the 20th.
    A: How about on the 21st?
        ‘Are there any rooms available on May 21st near the Columbus arena?’

(13) a. How about letting me use the restroom?
    *How about you will let me use the restroom?
    *How about will you let me use the restroom?

b. How about another drink?
    ‘Would you like another drink?’
    ‘Would you please have another drink?’
    ‘May I have another drink?’ [ok with please]
c. How about a kiss?
   [on a date:] ‘Will you give me a kiss?’
   [photographer to bride and groom:] ‘Would you please kiss each other?’
d. [Everyone but Marcia has been given a balloon:] How about Marcia?
e. [To roommate, attempting to figure out how to arrange furniture, moving around an armchair:] How about in the corner?

(14) [In a karaoke bar:] Everyone else has taken a turn. How about Marcia?
   ‘Will Marcia take a turn?’

How about ellipsis needn’t have a constituent antecedent:
(15) A: I’d like to book a hotel room in Columbus on Friday, May 20th. I need a non-smoking room and a swimming pool.
   B: We have suitable rooms available on that date in the Dublin Holiday Inn and the Westerville Marriott, both of which have pools.
   A: How about closer to the Arena District?
      ‘Are there any non-smoking rooms available on May 20th in Columbus in a hotel with a pool closer to the Arena District than Dublin or Westerville?’
   B: I’m sorry sir—the only rooms available on that date near the Arena District are in the Downtown Hyatt, which doesn’t have a pool.

(16) **Relevance** (Roberts 1996)
An utterance is RELEVANT in the context of utterance just in case it addresses the question under discussion in that context.

(17) A question is a partition on the set of possible worlds or situations, each cell representing a distinct complete answer. Given the set of alternative propositions Q-Alt (the set of partial answers) and worlds W, the corresponding question is the following equivalence relation, for \( w, w' \in W \): \[ \lambda w \lambda w' \left[ \forall p \in Q-Alt: p(w) = p(w') \right] . \]

(18) An utterance \( u \) addresses a question \( q \), iff \( u \) either contextually entails a partial answer to \( q \) (\( u \) is an assertion) or is part of a strategy to answer \( q \) (\( u \) is a sub-question of \( q \) or an imperative whose realization would help to answer \( q \)).

(19) An entity is RELEVANT in the context of utterance only if (iff?) the issue of what properties it has bears on the truth of one or more of the possible answers to the question under discussion.

(20) An entity is Salient just in case it is RELEVANT to the current purposes of the interlocutors and immediately evident to one attending to them.\(^1\) (Roberts 1998b)

(21) **Retrievability**: When an utterance is taken to be incomplete in some respect, a cooperative speaker must assume that a reasonable addressee would be attending to the intended denotatum at the time of utterance. Barring strong non-

\(^1\) I’m fairly certain that this is not yet adequate, but I give it in its strong form in the hope this will help draw out its inadequacies.
linguistic evidence to this effect, then the presupposed material to be retrieved must be made Salient linguistically.

3. **Prosodic de-accentuation and RETRIEVABILITY:**

Two views of the interpretive role of accent:
- Accent assignment determines pragmatic focus: Selkirk, Rooth
- What is significant is *lack of accent* (“de-accentuation”): Bolinger, Ladd, Schwarzschild, Kadmon, Roberts

Three notions of Focus in the literature:
(i) prosodic accentuation
(ii) a syntactic feature (+F) associated with syntactic constituents, with syntactically constrained projection up the phrase structure tree, and
(iii) a pragmatic notion, reflected in the question/answer relation, domain restriction with only, even, etc.

Selkirk (1984, 1992), Rooth (1985, 1992): (i) and (ii) inter-definable; (ii) determines (iii).
Ladd, Roberts 1996, 2006: Prosody plus syntax don’t determine (iii), only constrain it.

(22) is problematic for the Selkirk/Rooth view:

(22) A: John’s aunt Mary is wealthy and has lots of cars, so she often lets him drive one. Now that he’s turned 21, sometimes John drives Mary’s mini and other times he drives her red convertible.

B: What did he drive before?
A: He only drove her [BLUE] convertible.

Maximal projection of +F in (22): blue

Pragmatic Focus on blue predicts the reading: ‘out of all Mary’s convertibles of some color or other, the only one John drove was her blue convertible’.

Pragmatic Focus on the whole NP her blue convertible yields the attested reading: ‘out of all Mary’s vehicles, the only one John drove was her blue convertible’

**Schwarzschild’s (1999) Theory:**
- **Focus Rules:**
  Basic F Rule: An accented word is F-marked.
  Freely assign the feature +F to nodes in a tree.
- **Constraints:**
  **Givenness:** If a constituent is not F-marked, it must be Given.
  **FOC:** an F-marked constituent which isn’t immediately dominated by another F-marked constituent must contain a pitch accent
  **AVOIDF:** Do not F-mark (i.e., F-mark only if necessary)
  **HEADARG:** A head is less prominent than its internal argument.
- **Ranking of constraints:** FOC >> AVOIDF >> HEADARG
• Definition of **GIVEN**:
  An utterance \( U \) counts as **GIVEN** iff it has a salient \([\text{possibly accommodated}]^2\) antecedent \( A \) and
  a. if \( U \) is type \( e \), then \( A \) and \( U \) corefer;
  b. otherwise: modulo \( \exists \)-type shifting, \( A \) \([\text{contextually}]\) entails the Existental F-Closure of \( U \).

**Existential Type Shift**: \( \text{ExClo} \)

a. If \( \omega \in D_a \), then \( \text{ExClo}(\omega) = \omega \)

b. For any conjoinable type \(<a,b>\): If \( \omega \in D_{<a,b>}, \) then \( \text{ExClo}(\omega) = \lambda w \exists u \in D_u[\text{ExClo}(\omega(u))(w)] \)

c. \( t \) is a conjoinable type.
  If \( b \) is a conjoinable type, then so is \(<a,b>\), for any type \( a \).

**Existential-F-Closure of \( U \) \( =_{df} \) the result of replacing F-marked phrases in \( U \) with variables and existentially closing the result, modulo existential type-shifting

Example: \( A: \) a red apple \( \rightarrow \) \( \text{MakesGIVEN} \rightarrow \) \( U: \) a \( [\text{green}]_F \) apple

\[
\downarrow \quad \downarrow
\]

\[
\exists x.\text{apple}(x) \land \text{red}(x) \quad \models \quad \exists x.\text{apple}(x) \land \text{color}(x)
\]

wrt (22): \( \text{BLUE} \) is not **GIVEN**

*\( \text{her BLUE convertible} \) is **GIVEN**, by virtue of the fact that its Existential F-Closure \( \exists x[\exists y(\text{convertible}(m,y) \land \text{color}(x,y) \land \text{drive}(j,y))] \) is entailed by the antecedent NP \( \text{her red convertible} \) (with \( \text{her} \) coreferential with \( \text{Mary} \)).

By AVOIDF, \( \text{her BLUE convertible} \) cannot be F-marked.
Predicts the same unintuitive interpretation for (22) as Selkirk and Rooth.

Kadmon’s (2000) problem for Schwarzschild: cannot predict that (23a) is preferred over (23b) as a direct answer to the given question:

(23) Who borrowed the book that Max had purchased?
response (a): MAX borrowed it
response (b) Max BORROWED it.
(24) I’ll answer your question: Max borrowed it.

Source of the problem: The theory does not reflect a crucial requirement on the felicity of an utterance in a given context: Prosodic focus must be congruent with the question under discussion in that context, reflecting **RELEVANCE**.

**Kadmon’s (2003) theory**:

• Focus rules:
  Pitch accents are freely assigned to words, not to larger constituents.
  There is no direct relationship between pitch accent assignment and Focus.

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\( ^2 \) The possibility that the antecedent is accommodated follows Halliday (1967:204).
• Constraints:
  B is EXPECTABLE [in utterance U] iff [when] presented with the result of replacing
  B in U with a variable v, it is possible for the hearer to infer on the basis of
  prior context that the position of v in U should be occupied by B.
  EXPECTABLE ↔ unaccented [i.e. containing no word associated with an accent]
  [inherently relational; cf. the more anaphoric theory of Schwarzschild]

Problem for Kadmon: it is not only thematic material that may be de-accented
  thematic material: the constituents in an utterance that directly correspond (in
  both content and function) to portions of the corresponding question.
  rheme: a constituent which is not thematic
  E.g. in What did you eat for supper? I ate [a big salad] F for supper
       theme: I ate...for supper       rheme: a big salad

Bolinger, Ladd, Selkirk, Terken & Hirschberg:
• Parallelism with previous utterances supports de-accentuation, even in a rheme.
• Pronouns and other (non-deictic) definites with salient antecedents are de-
  accentuated as well, so long as they do not constitute an entire rheme.
Kadmon cannot capture these possibilities:
(25)  A:  What ever happened to your college roommates?
        B:  ANNE married an ITALIAN, and SUE married a southern European, TOO.
            married a southern European  is rhematic  [after Selkirk 1984]
(26)  A:  Mary’s upset.  What did you do?
        B:  I KISSED her.  her is part of the rheme

Roberts’ (2006) Theory:
Basic de-accentuation:
• De-accentuation backgrounds RETRIEVABLE material.
• Thematic material, because parallel with the immediate question under discussion,
  can always be RETRIEVED, so it can always (optionally) be deaccented, leaving
  rhematic material highlighted in relief.
• One can also RETRIEVE rhematic material if it has an antecedent that is GIVEN and is
  directly RELEVANT to the question under discussion (hence highly salient).
• The licensing conditions on de-accentuation are fairly liberal, because the utterance
  after de-accentuation retains its full descriptive content.
• The sole requirement besides RETRIEVABILITY: a rheme must contain some accent.

(A)  RETRIEVABLE (prosodic version):
  A constituent η which is part of an utterance U is RETRIEVABLE iff
  (i)  η is not the rheme in a direct answer to the Question Under Discussion at U,
  (ii) η has a Salient antecedent A and modulo ∃-type-shifting, A entails the
       Existential Accent-Closure of η.
  Existential Accent-Closure of η: replace with a variable any maximal
  constituent such that all of its content words are accented, and existentially
  bind the variables.
ACCENTUATION: Freely align pitch accents (in an independently generated prosodic structure) with words (in an independently generated syntactic structure).

RETRIEVABILITY PRESUPPOSITION: If a contentful constituent bears no accent, then its denotation is conventionally presupposed to be RETRIEVABLE. [with the well-known exception of certain intransitive verbs]

Novelty Implicature of Prosodic Focus (Quantity 2): If a constituent bears an accent, then its denotation is irRETRIEVABLE.

Features, consequences, superiority of the proposed theory of accentuation:
- No F-marking in syntactic structure; context resolves the intended pragmatic Focus.
  - Roberts (1996), Marti (20003): The phenomenon of Association with Focus (Jackendoff 1972, Rooth 1984) is driven by rhematicity with respect to the question under discussion, not accentuation per se.
- Schwarzchild’s FOC follows from (Ai) and (C) (with contraposition), if you accept the argument of Roberts (1996) that pragmatic Focus is always rhematic:
  (a) Retrievable → not Rhematic (Ai)
  (b) Rhematic → not Retrievable (Ai), Contraposition
  (c) Not accented → Retrievable (C)
  (d) Not Retrievable → Accented ('contains accent') (C), Contraposition
  (e) Rhematic → Accented ('contains accent') (b), (d), transitivity
- Schwarzchild’s AVOIDF follows from the conversational implicature in (D)
- No need for ranked constraints: FOC is effectively entailed, so “ranked” more highly than AVOIDF, which is defeasible.
- Not accounted for: Why verbs are less likely to be accented than their arguments. To explain this Schwarzchild just stipulates his low-ranked HEADARG condition.
- Other prosodic factors in interpretation: choice of accent, pitch range, phrasing, etc.
  - Second Occurrence Focus (Rooth, Beaver et al.), whatever its status, doesn’t involve accent placement.

The RELEVANCE-based RETRIEVABILITY theory of de-accentuation is able to capture the classically-observed prosodic congruence requirement on question/answer pairs (here presupposed, as in the Max examples, following Roberts 1996), while also acknowledging the role of parallel structures (Terken & Hirschberg 1994).

4. Ellipsis and RETRIEVABILITY:

Merchant’s (2001) Semantic Identity Constraint on Ellipsis:
(27) e-GIVENness (Merchant 2001:26)
An expression E counts as e-GIVEN iff E has a salient antecedent A and, modulo ∃-type shifting,
(i) A entails F-clo(E), and
(ii) E entails F-clo(A). [where F-clo is Schwarzchild’s Existential-F-closure.]
(28) Focus condition on VP-ellipsis: (Merchant 2001:26)
A VP \( \alpha \) can be deleted only if \( \alpha \) is e-GIVEN.

(29) Focus condition on IP-ellipsis: (Merchant 2001:31)
An IP \( \alpha \) can be deleted only if \( \alpha \) is e-GIVEN.

e-GIVENness, stronger than S’s GIVENness, requires identity under F-closure:

(30) Abby called Chuck an idiot after Ben insulted him.
[Last accent falls on Ben, so that the material in italics is de-accented]

(31) Abby called Chuck an idiot after Ben did.
‘…Ben called Chuck an idiot’
‘…Ben insulted Chuck’

(32) I know how MANY politicians Abby called an idiot, but I don’t know WHICH.
‘…which politicians she called an idiot’
‘…which politicians she insulted’

Problems for Merchant’s e-GIVENness:

4.1 Salience: What does it mean to require that a suitable antecedent be “salient”?

Stop-gap approach: Re-couch Merchant in terms of RETRIEVABILITY:

(33) e-RETRIEVABLE:
The intended denotation of constituent \( \eta \) in utterance U is e-RETRIEVABLE iff \( \eta \)
is not the rheme in a direct answer to the Question Under Discussion at U, and \( \eta \)
has a salient (hence RELEVANT) antecedent \( A \), and , modulo \( \exists \)-type shifting,
(i) \( A \) entails Accent-clo(E), and
(ii) \( E \) entails Accent-clo(A). [where Accent-clo is as in (B)]

Extra advantage: Captures what Hardt & Romero (2004) are getting at with their “c-
command in discourse” requirement, based on rhetorical relations; Roberts (2004)
characterizes rhetorical relations as strategies of inquiry, hence a function of the Question
Under Discussion. But the remaining problems 4.2 - 4.5 are also problems for Hardt &
Romero.

4.2 Sprouting: (Chung et al. 1995) In Sluicing, the Sluiced clause may question an
adjunct not present in the antecedent clause, demonstrating that the strong identity
condition in (27)/(33) is too strong:

(34) He finished the project, but we don’t know with whose help.

(35) A: I went to the doctor yesterday. B: Why?

4.3 Inner antecedent constraint (Chung et al. 1995): In Sluicing, a constituent within the
antecedent clause that is replaced with the \( wh \)-element in a Sluiced clause (the inner
antecedent) must be indefinite; cannot be definite or a proper name:

(36) John ate a meal with someone, and they all wonder who with.

(37) # John ate a meal with her/Mary, and they all wonder who with.
4.4 **Familiarity effects** (Chung et al. 2006): In Sluicing, indefinites in the antecedent clause which are not inner antecedents are obligatorily interpreted as definites in the Sluiced clause.

(38) Jill asked where someone had committed a crime, and Jack asked when.
‘Jack asked when that person had committed that crime’

Note that familiarity effects do not obtain with VP ellipsis or Gapping:

(39) Jill went to get a bucket, and Jack did too.
‘Jack went to get a bucket’ (not necessarily the same bucket)

(40) Jill took a bucket to the kitchen, and Jack to the bathroom.
‘Jack took a bucket to the bathroom’

4.5 **Roofing** (generalized from Chung et al. 1995): In Sluicing, a bound or **roofed** variable (one inside the scope of another operator) cannot serve as inner antecedent

(41) She didn’t talk to one student; I wonder who.

But there may be no inner antecedent, as in the Sprouting example (with the operator that implicit in the intensional verb *deny*):

(42) A: Condoleezza denied that Bush supported torture.
B: I wonder why.
‘I wonder why Condoleezza denied this’
#‘I wonder why Bush supported torture’

Note: If we change *denied* to *claimed*, the second interpretation is only acceptable if B presupposes (via accommodation) that Condoleezza was telling the truth.

**Generalized Roofing**: In ellipsis, the antecedent constituent(s) cannot be semantically “roofed” by (referentially dependent upon) an operator that doesn’t have scope over the elided constituent.

*prima facie* counterexample to Roofing for VP ellipsis:

(43) A: Condoleezza denied that Bush supported torture.
B: But they say CHENEY did.
‘they (not Condoleezza) say that Cheney supported torture’

N.B.: This isn’t modal subordination, nor is it Hob/Nob [community belief], nor is it necessarily accompanied by a presupposition on the part of B that Bush supported torture.

But in (43) the interpretation of the antecedent property of supporting torture does not depend on Condoleezza’s attitude. When the property *does* depend on the Roofing operator, VP ellipsis displays the Roofing effect:

(43) a) Marcia claimed that a unicorn was in her garden.
   b) According to her, she took its picture.
   c) Clara says Marcia is lying: Steve did.

In (a), ‘the property of being a unicorn in Mary’s garden’ is not attested in the Common Ground, but only in the worlds reflecting Marcia’s claim. (b) is ok by modal
subordination. (c) is interpreted as ‘Clara says Steve took the unicorn’s picture’, presupposing that Clara believes there was a unicorn in Marcia’s garden.

(44) Marcia denied that a unicorn was in her garden and she took its picture. #But Steve did.

Roofing also constrains Gapping:

(45) A: John believes that Mary likes chocolate.
    B: And [Alice]_F [vanilla]_F
       ‘John believes that Alice likes vanilla’
       #‘Alice likes vanilla’

Theory accounting for all the above without (27)/(33): **Ellipsis is a species of anaphora.**

The Roofing effect follows from the Scope Constraint of Roberts (1996b), arguably the logical basis for the accessibility requirement on anaphora in DRT: Coreference requires that any operator with scope over the antecedent take scope over the anaphoric element, as well:

(46) I very much doubt that John has a girlfriend.
    #She’s good looking.
(47) John has a girlfriend.
    She’s good looking.
(48) I very much doubt that John has a girlfriend.
    #STEVE has a girlfriend, too.

This follows from the assumption that anaphora is presuppositional (Heim 1982, Kadmon 1990, Roberts 2003). Presuppositions generally are about *presumed contextual entailments*. Anaphoric antecedents in discourse are not linguistic constituents, but existential entailments (“discourse referents”) (Roberts’ *weak familiarity*).

**Sluicing is anaphora to a weakly familiar eventuality.** It presupposes the existence of a **RETRIEVABLE** (hence, **RELEVANT** and Salient) eventuality, about which the question is posed.

This permits an explanation of the phenomena in problems 4.2 - 4.4 for Merchant:

- Sprouting: Just as we can adverbially modify eventualities (Davidson), we can question facets of an eventuality which have not yet been specified.
- Inner antecedent constraint: When a particular role in an eventuality has been specified to be filled with a familiar entity (via a definite or property name), it is informationally infelicitous to query who plays that role.
- Familiarity constraint: If in making the eventuality familiar a speaker has mentioned certain participants in that eventuality, they are thereby familiar, so should be referred to with defines when discussing the familiar eventuality.

**VP ellipsis is anaphora to a weakly familiar property.**

**Gapping:** what does it presuppose? The lack of familiarity effects suggests it isn’t an eventuality. But (45) is puzzling for the hypothesis that it presupposes a familiar relation, since the relation of liking (some flavor of ice cream) does not seem to be dependent on John’s belief-worlds.
Because the descriptive content of an elided constituent is non-existent, RETRIEVABILITY requires very high Salience (problem 4.1), so elliptical constructions generally require an overt antecedent. Roofing (problem 4.5) follows from the presupposition of weak familiarity.

5. **Definite Descriptions with “incomplete descriptions”**

Theories like those of Neale (1990), Elbourne (2005) assume a Russellian/Fregean semantics for English definite descriptions and pronouns, involving uniqueness in the model. They ignore the problems for semantic uniqueness discussed in Roberts (2003) and the ramifications of the presuppositional character of definites.

Central problems with these theories, including E-type, D-type pronouns (Roberts 2005):

- Descriptive content in definites is subject to the Scope Constraint. Simply saying that it is salient radically under-constrains the possibilities.

(49) Either John has a new car, or else #Mary has it.
(50) Either John has a new car, or else Mary has one.

- The descriptive content to be recovered (Neale) or deleted (Elbourne) is generally indeterminate; cf. Strawson’s (51), Neale’s (52) (under quantification) “pronominal contradiction problem”:

(51) A: A man jumped off the cliff.
    B: He didn’t jump, he was pushed. (Strawson)
(52) A: Every time I was there, a man jumped off the cliff.
    B: I bet that in most cases he didn't jump but was pushed.

- “descriptive content” retrieval requires reasoning, and hence cannot be retrieved simply from an antecedent NP (unlike VP ellipsis, Sluicing), and
- blurs any principled distinction between cases with and without linguistic antecedent.

- Other empirical problems discussed in Roberts (2005): too much uniqueness (minimal situations notwithstanding); and “number neutrality”.

Example (1) points the way to an alternative characterization of the role of descriptive content in definite NPs: It is not about picking out some entity in the world which is unique in virtue of bearing the property corresponding to the descriptive content. Among all those entities currently RETRIEVABLE, the descriptive content gives the addressee just enough information to uniquely pick out the intended antecedent for the definite among those entities weakly familiar in the discourse.
Partial Bibliography:


