

On becoming a pronoun: Towards a unified theory of pronouns, traces and ellipsis

Mark Baltin (mark.baltin@nyu.edu) & Jeroen van Craenenbroeck (jc3474@nyu.edu)

NYU & NYU / CRISSP / HUB

Outline

In this talk we present a unified theory of pronouns, traces and ellipsis sites. We argue that pronouns (or more generally, proforms) are not a primitive of the theory, but rather that they are defined configurationally as a functional head whose complement has been elided.

Empirical parallelisms between traces, pronouns and ellipsis

(i) traces vs. pronouns: as is well-known from the literature on resumptive pronouns, traces of movement can in various languages and in various contexts be spelled out as pronouns. Note, however, that even when such overt reflexes are missing, the pronominal nature of traces can often be detected. First, Postal (1998) shows that certain movement operations (B-extractions in his terminology) cannot proceed from “anti-pronominal contexts”, i.e. contexts in which pronouns cannot occur. These facts follow naturally if movement traces are pronominal in nature. Similarly, Moore (1998) argues that (1) involves copy raising with a *pro* rather than a trace in the embedded subject position.

- (1) Biz_i san-a [_{CP} *pro*_i sut ic-ti-k] gibi-gorun-du-k.
we-NOM you-DAT milk drink-PAST-1PL. like-appear-PAST-1PL.
'We appeared to you to have drunk milk.' (Turkish)

(ii) ellipsis vs. pronouns: as discussed by Lobeck (1995) and Hardt (1999), ellipsis sites share many properties with pronouns. For example, both of them allow for split antecedents:

- (2) John_i told Bill_j that they_{i+j} should leave together.

- (3) Jerry can [_{VP} walk]₁ and he can [_{VP} sing]₂. I can [_{VP} ___]₁₊₂ too, but not at the same time.

A similar conclusion is reached by Perlmutter & Orešnik (1973) with respect to Slovenian NP-ellipsis. While in a non-elliptical DP an attributive adjective obligatorily agrees with the head noun, in NP-ellipsis it invariably shows the masculine animate form:

- (4) Hočem {navaden / * navadnega} površnik.
I.want ordinary.MASC.INANIM ordinary.MASC.ANIM overcoat.MASC.INANIM
'I want an ordinary raincoat.'

- (5) Hočem {*navaden / navadnega} [_{NP} ___].
I.want ordinary.MASC.INANIM ordinary.MASC.ANIM
'I want an ordinary one.'

P&O explain these agreement patterns by positing a pronoun, rather than a full copy, at the ellipsis site in (5). As (6) shows, when an NP is pronominalized, the same masculine animate agreement shows up:

- (6) Včeraj smo našli mizo {pomazano / * pomazanega} s krvjo.
yesterdaywe found table stained.FEM.INANIM stained.MASC.ANIM with blood
'Yesterday we found the table stained with blood.'

- (7) Včeraj smo ga našli {*pomazano / pomazanega} s krvjo.
yesterdaywe it found stained.FEM.INANIM stained.MASC.ANIM with blood
'Yesterday we found it stained with blood.'

Finally, the correlation between ellipsis and pronouns can also be found in so-called vehicle change effects (Fiengo & May 1994), in which an R-expression in an ellipsis context converts into a pronoun (as can be seen from the absence of a condition C violation):

- (8) We thought that John_i would be arrested, but he_i didn't [_{VP} ___].

(iii) ellipsis vs. traces: Johnson (2001) notes that the positions in which VP-ellipsis is licensed seem to closely track VP-topicalization. In other words, eliding a VP seems to be parallel in some sense to moving it (i.e. to converting it into a trace).

- (9) * John started running down the street, but only after Sally started [_{VP} ___].

- (10) * John said that [_{VP} running down the street]_i, Sally started t_i.

The proposal: proforms as configurations

These empirical parallelisms are non-accidental, in our view, and indicate a unified underlying phenomenon: traces, ellipsis sites and elements contained in an ellipsis site can/must be converted into a pronoun. Positing a primitive feature [+pronominal] (Chomsky (1982) violates an otherwise plausible constraint on grammar, *Inclusiveness* (Chomsky 1995), which disallows the introduction of elements into a syntactic computation that are not present at the outset. Our solution involves defining pronouns, not in terms of a primitive feature, but in terms of a configuration. Our proposal is summarized as follows:

(11) A proform is a functional head whose complement has been elided. This approach extends Postal's (1966) hypothesis that pronouns are determiners whose NP-complement has been deleted. D° is not exceptional in this respect: when the complement is vP (cf. Johnson's (2004) analysis of VP-ellipsis as vP-ellipsis), T° is D°'s analogue; when the complement is TopP (as in sluicing, cf. Baltin 2006), the relevant head is Foc°.

A comparison with Elbourne (2008)

Our analysis is similar to that of Elbourne (2008), who takes ellipsis sites to be definite descriptions, i.e. complements of a silent THE. Investing this silent THE with empirical predictiveness involves correlating its properties with those of overt *the*. However, there are some crucial differences that militate against a silent THE. For instance, overt *the* blocks extraction of elements from the phrase that it heads, while silent THE does not, and it blocks the licensing of polarity items from outside of the DP, again unlike THE (cf. May (1977)):

- (12) a. * Who does John believe the claim that Fred likes ___?
b. Although I know who John believes that Fred likes, I don't know who Bill does ___.
- (13) a. John didn't see (*the) pictures of any of the boys.
b. John didn't see pictures of any of the boys, and Bill didn't ___ either.

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