Gapping without surprise: Toward an ellipsis-agnostic model of context dependence

Timm Lichte
Universität Düsseldorf
lichte@phil.hhu.de

Tag
Datum
Zeit
Raum

Ellipsis is commonly conceived as a surprising incident that we as a hearer or reader stumble across. Virtually all syntactic models on the market reflect this surprise by implementing special, dedicated rules (deletion, null anaphora, across-the-board movement etc.) to relate the "incomplete" utterance with the "complete" counterpart. Even those approaches that allow for "direct interpretation" in terms of incomplete, hence "defective", structures (e.g., Chao 1987), need to explicitly stipulate them. In other words, ellipsis is generally modeled as something special, or even alien, as opposed to "regular" syntactic structures. The problem with this outsider status is that it does not quite match the experience of a language user: in general, elliptical utterances can be easily processed (in many cases more easily than the putatively complete counterparts, cf. Fodor et al. 1974); elliptical utterances are abundantly frequent in everyday conversation; and elliptical utterances are central in language acquisition, that is, rather learned before than after their complete counterparts.

In this contribution, I will therefore take a different perspective on ellipsis, namely that ellipsis is not surprising at all, but well anticipated based on the conditions of language use. The underlying hypothesis will be this: the ability to generate and parse elliptical utterances arises from a more general ability, namely to deal with fragments during incremental processing. However, the big question then is how to precisely model this? I will present a tentative proposal based on Synchronous Tree Unification Grammar (STUG, Lichte 2012; 2015) and confine myself to gapping.

References: • Chao, W. 1987. *On ellipsis.* Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts dissertation. • Fodor, J. A. et al. 1974. *The psychology of language: An introduction to psycholinguistics and Generative Grammar.* McGraw-Hill. • Lichte, T. 2012. Synchronous Tree Unifcation Grammar. In *Proceedings of TAG+11*, 46–54. Paris, France. • Lichte, T. 2015.*Syntax und Valenz: Zur Modellierung kohärenter und elliptischer Strukturen mit Baumadjunktionsgrammatiken.* Berlin: Language Science Press.