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Elliptical Analysis between Linguistic Economy and Attention Focus

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Abstract

Languages have various devices that ensure the principle of linguistic economy since they provide a way of avoiding duplication and of following the maxim of "Be concise". Such devices include: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. Ellipsis is a kind of reduction and it is used to avoid repetition. Therefore, it can be defined as a device of leaving out a word or words from a sentence deliberately when the meaning can be understood without them. The present study is intended to conduct a linguistic analysis of Mansfield's short story "The Doll's House", showing how ellipsis, in its different types, function in a literary text. This analysis aims also at showing the important part ellipsis plays in revealing something about the characters and character traits, i.e., their personalities. Besides, the analysis indirectly helps reflect the theme of "class distinction". In short, ellipsis is shown not only as a device to achieve economy, but of drawing attention as well.

Key words: ellipsis, linguistic analysis, linguistic economy, criteria of ellipsis, characterization.

Introduction

Ellipsis can be defined as the omission of words recoverable or understood from the situational or the surrounding text (Yoo, 2011). Lyons (1977:589) regards ellipsis

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as one aspect of context dependence of spoken utterances of every day conversation. He views ellipsis as "one of the most obvious effects of contextualization and decontextualization...consists in supplying some element or elements from the preceding context". Thomas (1974: 43), on the other hand, defines ellipsis as "a communicative option to omit from sentences contextually available elements that are structurally required by the elements that do appear in those sentences".

To Halliday and Hassan (1976: 144) ellipsis is "substitution by zero" and the idea behind this is the fact that an elliptical item is the one which leaves particular structural slots to be filled from a preceding or following part of the sentence.

All the definitions mentioned above show that redundancy is most commonly reduced by the use of such abbreviating devices as ellipsis. So, the avoidance of repetition is a major test of ellipsis.

Grice (1975) in his article "Conversational Implicature", sheds light on the common knowledge through the use of the cooperative principle and the maxims through which the principle of reducing the message to what is essential seems to work out. By the "cooperative principle", Allerton (1979: 266) means "a tacit understanding of just how much the speaker should actually say, how much he leaves unsaid, and how meanings are to be implicated beyond what is actually said. In other words, the speaker is allowed, depending on the common knowledge he shares with the listener, to leave unsaid certain things that have been said or at least hinted at earlier, i.e., the speaker will make economical reference to the items he talks about in order to avoid wasting time and to focus on the new materials (Sa'eed, 1996). Basically, the notions of the given (known or old) as opposed to the new (unknown) are very important in the linguistic study of a text.

Ellipsis is a kind of reduction and it is used to avoid repetition. Therefore, it can be defined as a device of leaving out a word or words from a sentence deliberately when the meaning can be understood without them. For example in saying:

She might sing, but I don't think she will (sing)

The verb "sing" can be avoided after *will*. The other reason for ellipsis is that by omitting shared items, attention is focused on the new material as in the following example:

A: Have you spoken to him?

B: (I have) not yet (spoken to him)

People usually find the full form of such sentences unnecessary and use ellipsis to achieve more acceptable economy of statement. In transformational grammars, ellipsis is a term used by grammarians to refer to a sentence where, for reasons of economy, emphasis or style, a part of it is omitted. In most cases, ellipsis refers to something which has previously been said, but sometimes it anticipates what is about to be said.

Ellipsis is common to all styles of speaking and writing. In literary language, Murphy (1972:62) points out that ellipsis is mainly used to contrast the sense, to add lightness of balance to the lines, to give pettiness to the expression and to avoid using unnecessary words.

Criteria of Ellipsis

Because the boundaries of ellipsis are unclear, Quirk et al (1985) suggest that there are five criteria to clarify the ambiguity:

1. The ellipsis words are precisely recoverable: this means that in a context where no ambiguity of reference arises, there is no doubt as to what words to be supplied:

She can't sing tonight, so she won't *

Examples like this contain an ellipsis that presupposes words in a previous part of the same sentence. It is clear that in the example above, it is the word "sing" that has been elided.

2. The elliptical construction is grammatically "defective": typically, ellipsis is postulated in order to explain why some normally obligatory element of a grammatical sentence is lacking. If such "gaps" didn't occur, there would be no obvious grammatical motive for invoking the concept of ellipsis in the first place. For example in:

She can't sing tonight, so she won't *

The auxiliary "won't" occurs without a following main verb.

3. The insertion of the missing words results in a grammatical sentence (with the same meaning as the original sentence) and this is needed because there is always the assumption that whatever is understood through ellipsis is part of the meaning of the elliptical sentence.
4. The missing words are recoverable from the neighboring text (rather than from the structural or situational context), and:

5. Presented in the text in exactly the same form: of these two related criteria, the latter is depended in the former. It may be held that textual recoverability is the surest guarantee of ellipsis, since without it, there is usually room for disagreement on what particular word or expression has been elided.

Classification of Ellipsis

Grammatically speaking, ellipsis can be of three types: situational, textual, and structural. Biber et al. (1999:156) group ellipsis into two categories, depending on whether the elided elements are recoverable from the situational context, i.e., "situational" ellipsis, which is particular to informal conversation or from the surrounding text, i.e., "textual" ellipsis. Carter and McCarthy (2006:181), on the other hand, add another category to the mix, "structural" ellipsis, distinguishing it from textual ellipsis:

1. A: Don't know what's gone wrong here.
B: Oh. Need any help?
(Situational ellipsis; understood: I don't know...Do you need...)
2. He applied and got the job.
(Textual ellipsis; understood from previous clause: ...and he got the job)
3. The car he was driving was stolen.
(Structural ellipsis; optional use of that: The car that he was driving ...)

Before discussing these three types in more detail, it is necessary and important to know the different positions of elliptical constructions. Such elliptical constructions, according to Quirk et al (1985:393), can be divided into three main categories:

1. Initial ellipsis or "ellipsis on the left" where initial elements are elliptical as in:
He will come later, if (he comes) at all.
Because of its peripheral introductory rule, the conjunction "if" may be disregarded in considering this example as initial ellipsis.
2. Medial ellipsis which occurs when medial elements of a unit are elided as in:
I'll gladly pay for the hotel, if you will * for the food.
3. Final ellipsis or "ellipsis on the right" where final elements are elided as in:
I have eaten more than you (have eaten).

Situational Ellipsis

The presupposition in an elliptical construction may occasionally be situational (or 'exophoric' in Halliday and Hassan's terms (1976)) where it is required from the listener to think backwards or forwards and to look around him for the most obvious referent. Quirk et al (1985: 895) believe that situational ellipsis applies to such cases

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of weak ellipsis, where the exact words might be unclear and also to other cases where it is quite clear what has been omitted, e.g., the elliptical subject can only be "it" in:

*Looks like rain.

They add that situational ellipsis is typically initial as in the case with the omission of subject and/or operator:

(Do you) want anything?

But it can sometimes be final as with the weakly recoverable "How could you*?" said as a rebuke to someone who has just committed some situationally known fully.

Structural Ellipsis

Here the full form is recoverable not through knowledge of context but simply through knowledge of grammatical structure. Structural ellipsis can be illustrated, for instance, by the omission of relative pronoun as in:

There is a man below wants to see you.

In this sentence, "man below" is felt to be just as intimately connected with what follows as with what precedes it. Such clauses are termed "contact clauses" because of the close contact between the antecedent and the clause. In such cases, it is customary to say that the relative pronoun "who" is understood or omitted and the clause is called elliptical.

Structural ellipsis may be further illustrated by the common omission of propositions, determiners, operators, pronouns and other closed class words in block language, e.g., in headlines, titles, notices. They are also commonly omitted in personal letters, in familiar style, in lecture notes, diaries, and telegrams as in:

US heading for new slump [i.e., the US is heading for a new slump]

Structural ellipsis, then, depends on knowledge of grammatical structure as shown in the case above. To Quirk et al (1985: 900) such structural ellipsis is restricted to the written style and contrast with the initial situational ellipsis characteristic of familiar spoken English since both types function as devices of economy through the ellipsis of items that have a low information value.

Textual Ellipsis

Textual ellipsis may be either anaphoric or cataphoric since it is a relation within the text. To Halliday and Hassan (1976), anaphoric ellipsis is the dominant type of textual ellipsis since the presupposed item, in the greater majority of instances, may presuppose something that has gone before it.

Quirk et al (1985:895) refer to a restriction which governs ellipsis in this respect. The restriction is that:

The antecedent must normally have precedence over the elliptical construction by taking either an earlier position in the structure, or a higher position (where 'higher' refers to a higher position in the tree diagram specifying the constituent structure of the sentences).

In cataphoric ellipsis, Halliday and Hassan (1976: 17) assume that the presupposition may point in the opposite direction with the presupposed item following, i.e., forward pointing. To Quirk et al (1985), cataphoric ellipsis can be seen in a clause which is subordinate to the clause in which the element occurs as in:

Those who prefer (to) *can stay indoors.

Allerton (1979) views that the cataphoric is the exception and the anaphoric is the rule since "it is naturally much easier to refer to something already made known to the listener, rather than something he must wait to be introduced to".

Nature of Ellipsis

Brandon (2004) states that examples of grammatical ellipsis arise from two main sources: dialogue and some compressed grammatical structure. Thus, if I ask "How did you get here?" you might well reply simply by saying "By bus", which would have to be understood as elliptical for something like "I got here by bus".

In general, it is clear that a context of a dialogue allows, indeed often requires, a certain amount of such-governed ellipsis in which what would otherwise not be accounted as grammatical substances can stand as complete utterances.

Ellipsis is then used in conversation. The conversation dialogues are full of it. If ellipsis were not used, our sentences would become gradually longer as conversation progressed as in:

A: Where are you going?

B: To the shops (i.e., I'm going to the shops)

A: Why? (i.e., why are you going to the shops?)

B: To get some bread (i.e., I'm going to get some bread).

And so on...

Moreover, and for the analysis of ellipsis, textual ellipsis is further divided into proximal and distal depending on whether the elided elements occur within the same clause, i.e., proximal, or across clausal boundaries, i.e., distal.

Linguistic Analysis of Mansfield's "The Doll's House"

Among the four major registers that Biber et al (1999: 282) examine: conversation, fiction, news, and academic prose, the researcher chooses to analyze that one which is related to fiction. In other words, since ellipsis is clearly shown in the conversational side of the written style, the researcher attempts an elliptical analysis of Katherine Mansfield's "The Doll's House". This story is based on what is called "class distinction", the superiority of the rich over the poor and how this feeling or trend is intensified as the story proceeds.

The conversation in the story starts with:

"Open it quickly, someone!"

which constitutes an initial ellipsis of the verb "let" and the previous utterance should read as follows:

"Let someone open it quickly"

which could be said by any of the Burnell children "Isabel", "Lottie" or "Kezia", or even by "Pat", one of those who work in the house. The speaker in the first utterance is left open by the story writer to show the reader the amount of interest such people have. They are all captured by the new comer, "The Doll's House", with all its colors and decorations.

The beauty, the elegance and the transparency of the house make the Burnell children eager to boast the other day. They become in a hurry to tell everybody and to describe the house to everybody. This is clear from Isabel's first utterance:

"I must tell * because I'm the eldest*. And you two can join in after *. But I must tell first".

If we consider the ellipsis in the different positions in the previous utterance, it should be read as follows:

"I must tell you that we have got a doll's house because I'm the eldest sister. And you two can join in after I finish telling the others. But I must tell that we have got a doll's house".

Mansfield here does use ellipsis to avoid repetition and to achieve brevity in wording on the part of Isabel.

After that, and when we go on further in the story, we feel that Isabel keeps the same procedure, the same policy in delivering her ideas and words:

"And I must choose who's to come and * see it first. Mother said * I could*" Here, instead of repeating "who is to", which is the antecedent in the example, Isabel feels it sufficient to join "come" and "see" using the conjunction 'and'. In the same utterance, the absence of "choose" after "could" gives weight to the modal "could" when she stops here, i.e., she stops not on the activity of choosing but on the capability of doing so. She is an authority, therefore, what we have here is not only brevity of expression but also focus on the possibility of doing the action rather than the action itself "choosing the right people the mother wants her children to come and see the doll's house".

Here, Mansfield expresses the attitude of the Burnell family, through the character of the mother and her eldest daughter Isabel, towards other people, i.e., the people in the lower rank. Therefore, from the beginning we smell what we call "class distinction".

Later, Isabel goes on her description concerning the great excitement of the carpet, the beauty of the windows and the doors, the elegance of the bedclothes. Then Kezia, the youngest sister, breaks in saying:

"You've forgotten the lamp made of, Isabel"

And Isabel responds by saying:

"Oh, yes*, and there is a little lamp, made of yellow glass..."

This "yes" indicates that the following is a confirmation and instead of repeating Kezia's words concerning her forgetting of the little lamp, she goes on describing it to let the image stick into the school-mates' minds. Not repeating the words after "yes" doesn't mean that Isabel is reluctant or inconsiderate to what has been mentioned by her sister, but it means that she is in a hurry to finalize the picture of the doll's house, but contrary to her expectation, she misses the chance when her youngest sister 'Kezia' interrupts again to give the last touch of the description by saying:

“The lamp’s best of all*”

But the best of what? She stops here crying and thinking that Isabel is not saying enough. The ellipsis in the complement which should read as follows:

“The lamp’s best of all those mentioned before” gives us the idea that Kezia feels the power of the elder over the younger and by saying the ‘elided sentence’ while she is crying, she gives us the impression that she is being bored by this overwhelming power of the eldest.

Isabel’s power is quite clear when she chooses the first two friends: Emmie Cole and Lina Logan to come back with her to see the doll’s house and at the same time she promises the others that they are going to be the next on the list. Kezia is left with nobody except the Kelvey’s little girls, Lil and Else, who usually sit under the trees to eat their lunch. Also because she feels sorry for them, being underestimated by their mother, Mrs. Burnell, and their society as well, Kezia asks her mother:

“Mother, can’t I ask the Kelvey’s just once?”

And the mother answers:

“Certainly not*, Kezia.”

The negative element “not” carries the whole elided sentence and instead of repeating Kezia’s words, to which we expect a ‘yes’ answer since Kezia uses a negative question, the mother finds it enough to emphasize the impossibility of the plea. So once again, ellipsis is used to focus or shed light on the class distinction. This interpretation is reinforced by the mother’s comment on Kezia’s “Why not?”:

“But why not?”

“Run away Kezia, ; you know quite well why not*”, the mother said.

Kezia’s rhetorical question carries an ellipsis of a whole sentence which should read as:

“but, why I can’t ask the Kelveys just once?”. The mother’s response comes to emphasize the same idea behind the rhetorical question and the response should read as:

“Kezia, you know quite well why you can’t ask the Kelveys just once.”

So, ellipsis comes to pin point the fact that both the mother and her daughter ‘Kezia’, and the other daughters as well, know about the class distinction and how it is dealt with as a truth. But the only difference between the little child, Kezia, and the

rest of her family is that she doesn't believe in so. That's why she is going to give them a chance at the end of the story to have a look at the lamp in spite of the mother's refusal.

This trend, i.e., feeling and dealing with people in discontent and looking down on them is not only reflected by the Burnell children but also by the other children whom they befriend. For example, in the first chance for the Burnell and their friends to talk about the Kelvey's, they show how they look down on such poor innocent people:

"Lil Kelvey's going to be a servant when she grows up"

"Oh, no, how terrible*"

The whole elided "that clause" after "terrible" shows how pitiful and bitter their feeling towards the Kelvey's is when they grow up.

In another situation we find Emmie Cole who swallows in a very special way and looks at Isabelas she's seen her mother do on such occasions and says:

"It's true---it's true-----it's true*."

What is it true? So, the whole elided 'that clause' which should read as:

"It's true that Lil Kelvey's going to be a servant when she grows up,"

indicates the depth of their feeling towards the Kelvey's. Instead of repeating Isabel's words concerning the Kelvey's, and we know that repetition or reiteration means sometimes reinforcement of the same idea, Emmie prefers to elide the clause and to stop on the clause "it's true" to give more emphasis. In other words, the elided clause gives more depth to the idea since the focus is on the new information which is "it's true".

Mansfield's idea is more emphasized by Lena Logan's question:

"Shall I ask her *?"

She wants to ask her about what? Mansfield knows, we know, and the little children know what she wants to ask her about and there is no need because it is obvious to us all. That's why she says it in whisper.

Now consider this short dialogue between the Brunell's friends:

"You're afraid to *" said Jessie May

"I'm not frightened *"said Lina Logan.

"Watch! Watch me! Watch me now!"Said Lina.

"Is it true * you are going to be a servant when you grow up, Lil Kelvey?" cried Lena at the top of her voice."

In this exchange between Jessie and Lena, we find that Lena is trying gradually to give vent to her tongue to utter the whole truth, which has already been elided for many times but now she says it at the top of her voice. Here, we have the ellipsis of the pronoun 'that' and not the whole that clause. In the previous ellipsis, the story writer tries not only repetition, which is the main purpose of ellipsis, but also to emphasize certain things like "being afraid", "not being frightened" and so on. So, in this situation, we have two functions of ellipsis: to avoid repetition and to shed light or focus on the main elements or points through which we can analyze our characters.

Let's now look at the other side of the picture, i.e., Kezia and the Kelveys relationship. As we have noticed before and in spite of what the Burnells and their friends have done to the Kelveys, Lil and Else haven't uttered a word but instead they have given a foolish smile to all. Kezia, the youngest of the Burnells, unlike her sisters and their friends, is different in that she has a very kind heart and she lives in an innocent childhood. This is quite clear from her invitation to the Kelveys to come and see the doll's house in spite of the fact that her mother highly objects to this idea:

"You can come and see our doll's house if you want to *"

Here we have an ellipsis of the predicate after "to" and the example should read as follows:

"If you want to come and see our doll's house"

And the ellipsis here for the sake of brevity. Lil, instead of giving an answer, she turns red and then she shakes her head. Kezia, then, asks the following question:

"Why not*?"

This "why not" is an elliptical form for "why don't you come and see our doll's house if you want to come and see it". Kezia is astonished and really asks about the reason behind this.

At last, Lil breaths and utters a word to Kezia's abbreviated question:

"Your mother told our mother * you weren't allowed to speak to us".

Here we have the ellipsis of the optional "that". To this, Kezia responds by saying:

"Oh, well *"

This non-sentence response implies two elliptical interpretations:

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“Oh, well our mother told your mother that we weren’t allowed to speak to you”,
or

“Oh, well you can come and see our doll’s house”.

The second interpretation is reinforced by Kezia’s invitation:

“It doesn’t matter, you can come and see our doll’s house just the same, come on. Nobody’s looking.”

But once again no response on the part of the Keklveys and Lil shakes her head still harder. Then, Kezia breaks the silence by asking the following negative rhetorical question:

“Don’t you want to *?”

In this negative question, the ellipsis is a verb complement and the question should read as:

“Don’t you want to come and see our doll’s house?”

The other side of the sentence is elided because the concentration is on the first part of the question which is negative and we know that the negative question is used by the speaker when he wants to instigate the hearer to say “yes”. And this is really what happens due to the writer’s comment when she indicates that there is a pull at Lil’s dress by Else. The pull of the dress is the answer to the question and it means “yes, we want to come and see the doll’s house”.

The class distinction is melted for awhile by Kezia and the Kelvey’s, but it soon comes up to work again when Kezia’s mother, aunt Beryl, shouts out saying:

“You know as well as I do *, you’re not allowed to talk to them...”

The ellipsis of the pronoun ‘that’ in this example is optional and by saying so, aunt Beryl reprobates what her little child has done and that is why she calls her saying:

“* Bad, disobedient little girl!”

This non-sentence is the elliptical form of “you are a disobedient little girl,” or “What a bad, disobedient little girl you are!”

By eliding the subject and the operator, the speaker in this sentence is trying to make her rebuke more powerful and more effective.

Conclusion

To sum up, we can say that ellipsis, as a rhetorical figure of speech, is the omission in a sentence of one or more words which would be needed to express the sense completely. It is a kind of reduction used to avoid repetition, to achieve a more acceptable economy of statement and to shed light on the new material. This is why there is a great deal of ellipsis in conversation. The conversational dialogues are full of it and if ellipsis weren't used, our sentences would become gradually longer as conversation progressed.

When ellipsis, with all its kinds, is applied to Mansfield's "The Doll's House", it has been noticed that such an ellipsis has played an important role in revealing the nature of the main and the secondary characters' personalities. In addition, it has played a role in eliciting the theme of the story "the class distinction" through the analysis of the ellipses made by the characters.

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