

Gradience and sluicing

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Work on the possibility of preposition omission under elliptical constructions, in particular under sluicing (1), always assumes that there is a categorical constraint motivated by the presence or absence of preposition stranding in non-elliptical clauses in a given language (Merchant 2001-2009, Vicente 2006, Stjepanović 2008). Thus, a language without preposition stranding has no option of preposition omission under sluicing, but a language with preposition stranding does have that option. Although well-documented exceptions to this constraint abound in the literature (Vicente 2006, Lasnik 2007, Fortin 2007, Szczegielniak 2008), they have thus far received treatment on a language-by-language basis. I provide a new perspective on these exceptions, suggesting that they are not arbitrary, but follow from cognitive factors involved in language processing. I look at the relevant issues in Polish sluicing.

As my starting point, I note that most of the acceptable cases of preposition omission in non-preposition-stranding languages exhibit increased complexity of the phrases that sluiced wh-phrases refer back to (correlates) and of the sluiced phrases themselves (2). This pattern agrees with recent research on language processing that shows that a linguistically complex representation is easier to retrieve from memory than a non-complex one (Ariel 2001, Vasishth and Lewis 2006, Hofmeister 2007, 2008), and that such complexity can both facilitate the processing of syntactic islands and raise their acceptability (Culicover 2008, Hofmeister and Sag forthcoming).

I propose that linguistic complexity impacts the acceptability of prepositionless sluices based on the results of five controlled acceptability studies (I used ANOVAs to analyze the data). They explored the relationship between the acceptability of linguistically complex correlates processed prior to sluiced phrases and that of non-complex correlates either preceding or following (as in reverse sluicing) sluiced phrases. I found that a non-complex correlate and sluiced phrase significantly lower the acceptability of preposition omission, where non-complexity is represented as a pronominal correlate and *who/what* in place of an NP correlate and *which*-phrase (3a,b) or a one-syllable preposition in place of a multisyllabic one (4a,b). Similarly, correlates following prepositionless sluiced phrases were judged significantly worse than those preceding them.

These data raise the question of whether increased linguistic complexity raises the acceptability of every syntactic violation, and whether complexity affects acceptability when no overt correlates are present. To find the answers, I ran two acceptability judgment experiments. The results indicate that (1) complexity has no impact on the acceptability of sprouting when prepositions are retained but overt correlates are missing, see (5), (2) if preposition omission is categorically impossible, as it is under sprouting, the complexity of a wh-phrase does not alleviate the badness (6).

A categorical ban on preposition omission under Polish sluicing would provide evidence for an explicit link between elliptical and non-elliptical clauses, and hence for a transformational account of sluicing. My data cast doubt on such an analysis, suggesting instead that constraints on preposition omission are gradient, not categorical, and have an explanation in the domain of processing. More research is ongoing involving self-paced reading and longitudinal studies.

- (1) They gave their money away to someone, but I don't remember (to) who.
- (2) Sara rozmawia o jakichś badaniach, ale nie wiem (o) jakich (badaniach).
Sarah talks about some research.I, but not I.know about what (research).I
- (3a) Pracowali nad czymś, ale nie wiem (nad) czym.
they.worked on something.I but not I.know on what.I
- (3b) Pracowali nad jakimś projektem, ale nie wiem (nad) jakim (projektem).
they.worked on a project.I but not I.know on what (project).I

(4a) Adam idzie do kogoś, ale nie wiem (do) kogo.

Adam goes to somebody.G but not I.know to who.G

(4b) Adam idzie zamiast kogoś, ale nie wiem (zamiast) kogo.

Adam goes instead of somebody.G but not I.know instead of who.G

(5) Studenci narzekają, ale nie wiem na którego nauczyciela.

students complain but not I.know about which teacher.A

(6) *Studenci narzekają, ale nie wiem który test.

students complain but not I.know which test.A

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