THE SAVING SLIDE TO DYNAMISM: ELLIPSIS CAUGHT UP IN ITS OTHERNESS

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ABSTRACT

Locked into various accounts, ellipsis takes up all of the space of this article. Its theme being the conflict between deletion and non-deletion, the paper departs from transformational-generative grammar and passes through anti-deletionist programs to touch on an outline of possibly the most promising Discourse Representation Theory. However, the views presented are not quite safeguarded from the taint of the author's critical assessment.

1. Introduction

Ideally, this paper emerges as a meditation on and farewell to the position that elliptical structures and complete versions thereof ever display identity of descent, either semantically or syntactically. Thus this detour into the state-of-the-art profile of ellipsis finds one in pursuit of approaches that engage, rather than heal, the rift that may be felt between what ellipsis is in its heart and soul and much-talked-about attempts to recover for it the grace to cover more areas than its base allows. While sustaining a superimposition of appropriate theories of grammar over the span of this work, I do not examine the minute details pertaining to an interpretation of elliptical constructions. It is largely general assumptions drawing the ire of other linguists that form my chosen, chronological continuum from what is taken to be deleted (transformational-generative grammar) to what is taken to be woven into the surrounding context (dynamic semantics).

2. Ellipsis as part and parcel of optional deletion

The premises that underlie this work require that a spotlight be cast upon those areas of ellipsis over which linguists usually part company; for clearly, ellipsis,

with its products, is always comfortably digested into the linguistic system and adjudicated according to criteria at times not a little conflicting.

If sentences interpreted as deficient in semantic material start life as remnants from their "complete" counterparts, then ellipsis cannot be redeemed from its duty of a transformation-fueled mechanism. When Allerton (1975: 213) speaks of ellipsis, he does so in just these terms, expressly pinpointing the commonalities which must be wrested from this process and all kinds of regular deletions. Indeed, inasmuch as the nature of deletion points to intricacies more subtle than just the obligatory means of relating the "deep or intermediate structure of a sentence with a structure nearer the surface" (Allerton 1975: 213), ellipsis seems to easily wind its way into optional deletion, a channel through which the nuances of style show up.

Ever alert to the fact that object deletion sets the stage for a more profound scrutiny of the motivation for optional deletion, Allerton (1975: 214-215) teases apart verbs unaccompanied by any object that still demand that some kind of object be reconstructed in one way or another from those that do not. His distinction resonates with a sense of necessity to evoke the notions of contextual and indefinite deletion as the rationale behind those two verb categories, respectively. That contextual deletion is as much bound up with a linguistic context as it is with a non-linguistic one should by no means cause bewilderment. Nor is it possible for such verbs as the following, lifted bodily out of Allerton (1975: 214-215), to carry full messages when studied in isolation:

1)   He's watching.
2)   Sorry, I wasn't listening.
3)   I just pushed.

Clearly, a stumbling block to any interpretation of these is the lack of any contextual background, as is borne out by every language speaker's total assent to the listener's need for further explanations. Once viewed from this perspective, contextual deletion goes all the way to erase only those items which have nevertheless been preserved in the flow of previous discourse, or are present alternatively in the form of some non-linguistic clue.

Standing loyal and true to his deletionist stance, Allerton (1975) considers it a perfect avenue to an illumination of the functioning of verbs like *read, hunt, paint, clean, cook, drive* (motor vehicles), *examine* (test academically), *sew, think* (about) as well. Every single occurrence of them remains in the grip of indefinite deletion, a process operating on items that receive implied rather than recoverable "representation". The utterance

4)   He's reading.   (Allerton 1975: 214)

has justifiable aspirations to a full-fledged semantic unit, with the dim outlines of its object(s) neither crystallized at the surface structure nor expected to be; therefore it transcends the boundaries of contextual deletion to emerge as the corollary of indefinite deletion. The dependencies between the aforementioned kinds of deletion are schematically represented in Figure 1 (Allerton 1975: 221):

Figure 1.
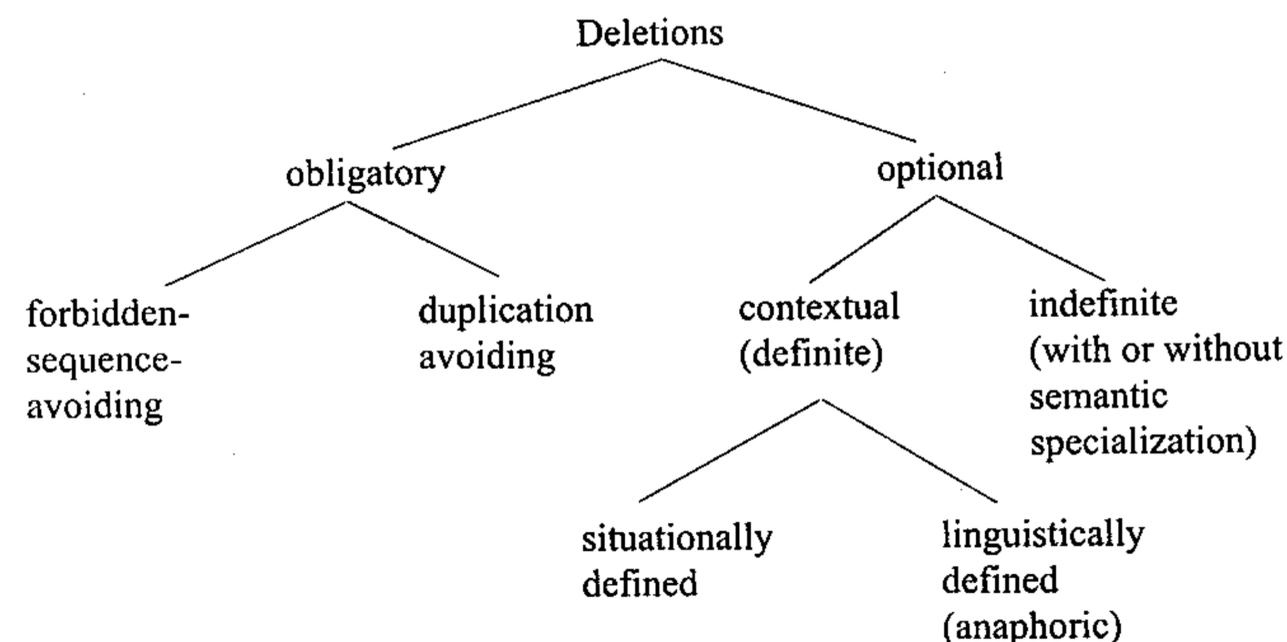
Without delving any deeper into that binary division we may now proceed to see how much redundant potential is suspended in optional deletion (= ellipsis). Specifically, it ascends into the sphere of "suppression of non-essential elements in a normal utterance", and beyond that into three other spheres:

a.   deviation of performance
b.   phonological reduction of elements with high redundancy, e.g., *Leaving*?
c.   avoidance of duplication in additive, corrective and completive utterances
                                                              (Allerton 1975: 222).

3. Alternative views on ellipsis

Allerton's triumphant filterings of ellipsis through the net of deletions into a transformational whole, breed considerable controversy.

When placed in the service of the natural generative grammar, elliptical sentences are craftily maneuvered into the ground of constructions whose surface structures hold critical clues to their semantic representations. This unique intercourse dictates that, as Vennemann (1975) remarks, every modification at the surface structure be projected upon the pragmato-semantic level; and so it remains in perfect working order, with a potential synonymy of slightly syntacti-

cally divergent "discourses" not just disregarded, but welcome. In so principled an account, ellipsis deserves the proud title of a mechanism that seals the semantic idiosyncracy of its outcome. Yet, paradoxically, Vennemann (1975) does not tear ellipsis from deletion, in actual fact, ellipsis equals deletion or "zero lexicalization", be it only for his generative-grammar roots. As one ponders this proposal, an unbidden thought occurs. Deletion must obviously have the power of generating strings whose semantic relation to the source shades into that of non-equivalence, however social or stylistic its premises may prove. In the matrix of Vennemann's (1975) program, ellipsis is a linguistic short-cut and thereby a means of truncating messages whose thematic parts are naturally dispensable.

Couched in tones of unmistakable disapproval, deletion merits no place whatsoever in Shopen and Świeczkowski's (1976) program. Perhaps the fullest formula under which to indicate the intended aspects of their treatment of ellipsis would be to say that incomplete sentences are pointedly elevated to the status of expositors of distinct, albeit partial, propositions, their descent distilled to that of direct base generation. Parenthetically, what throws its weight behind elliptical sentences are speakers' inclinations not to "bother their audience with information they already have or that they can find out easily themselves" (Shopen and Świeczkowski 1976: 112). Therefore, the apprehension of isolated "minimal" utterances translates into detecting the subtle signals that they invariably broadcast – their semantic and syntactic load. Both are the residuum of some intricate message despite the utterance, or whatever small part is left thereof, being neatly divested of any redundancies. And so relieved, the utterance lays the groundwork of its "entailed meaning" whose strands of dependence cannot but be disentangled from the context, whereupon only the burden of complementation is transferred. Such an attachment to context-unrelated analysis largely presages Thomas' (1979: 61-62) floating his hypothesis about how the process of catalysis unfolds. Along these lines, it is easy to grasp the dualism that inheres in ellipsis and the resultant division into functional (with the predicate left unworded) and constituent ellipsis (with the argument(s) left unworded); and easier still to doubt the *raison d'etre* of Shopen and Świeczkowski's harboring the notion of obligatory ellipsis, and hence deletion, in otherwise deviant strings like the following:

5)   *The prince became from a frog (to) a monster.

                              (Shopen and Świeczkowski 1976: 117)

Thomas (1979), before evicting ellipsis, as it were, from transformational theories, strives to block the penetration of other kinds of "linguistic absence" into its exclusive realm. What is palpably thrust upon our awareness is the way he places contextual dependence, doubtless a concomitant of ellipsis, in opposition to context-unrelated phenomena, which may nevertheless eventuate in creating

gaps in sentences, i.e. elision and non-realization. If genuinely elliptical structures are invested with a sufficient dose of vagueness to require that the information gap be bridged by none but the "wider context", the other processes exact no such demands. Elision, when it applies, affects those items whose lodgement in the sentence has no bearing on its semantic completeness. Alternative phrasings might be that in a sentence that had some constituent(s) elided "a determinate interpretation in terms of the language system" is not in the least distorted (Thomas 1979: 46). To adopt Allerton's (1975) rubric, "phonological reduction" as a mark of "high redundancy" comes closest, of all of his kinds of ellipses, to elision.

Raised beyond the limits of ellipsis is also non-realization, which emerging as another term for Allerton's (1975) indefinite deletion, is nevertheless stripped of any deletionist overtones. Fully optional, non-realization then consigns absent elements to what is implied, the possibility of extension being retained at all times. Quite understandably, this position lends a firm hand to viewing non-realization as a process taking nourishment from optional transitivity. Thus, Thomas (1979: 53-55) too shifts his focus to an account of verb-object sequences. His is, however, a veritable intensification of ellipsis being broken off and torn from non-realization, a distinction ultimately discharged into a binary categorization of English transitive verbs. Needless to say, Allerton's (1975: 214) contextual deletion comes into convergence with Thomas' (1979: 55) object ellipsis (Figure 2).

Figure 2.
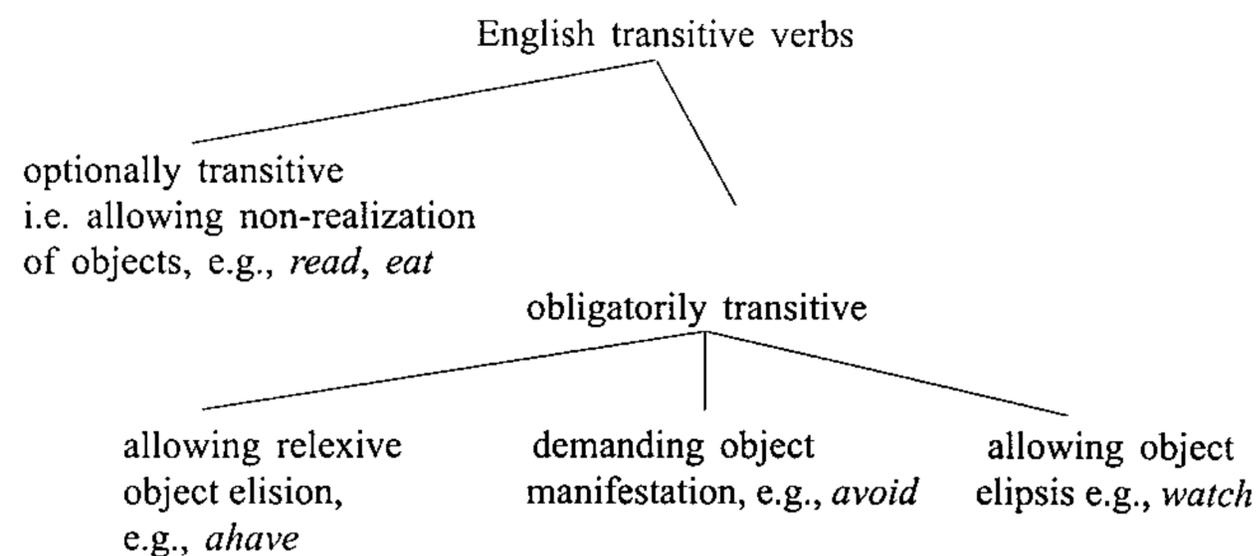
Running all through Thomas' awareness there is an intertwinement of three planes that come into a non-transformational assessment of elliptical sentences: semantics, syntax and manifestation. Amidst the ruins of deletion, a sentence with a gap contained within, when nestled in a context, broadens semantically

into a complete unit; whereas the gap shapes its being on the plane of syntax as one "requir[ing] semantic filling" (Thomas 1979: 59). The highest plane, that of manifestation, is largely exempt from the kind of analysis that accretes to deletion, for "no overt manifestation ever existed" (Thomas 1979: 60). Similarly, non-realization, with its non-existent items, eludes deletionist explanation.

Just how a "partial sentence" reconstitutes itself into wholeness can be gauged from the inner workings of its syntactic description, which takes place at the intersection of catalysis and interpolation. What the former unleashes is not a mere random coupling of elements, but a considered one, conditioned by "our knowledge of the occurrence dependencies of the language system" (Thomas 1979: 61), with "occurrence dependencies" lifted bodily out of Haas (1972) and set into the form of intra-sentential relations. If catalysis thus renders obeisance to the fact that the meaning of an elliptical sentence equals "the overtly manifested meanings plus a syncretism ... between all the entities that could have occurred in the given place in the chain" (Thomas 1979: 62), then interpolation singles out the right entity in the context to fill the elliptical gap. It is against the background of occurrence dependencies that Thomas (1979) finally draws solid lines between ellipsis and non-realization. Either the reciprocity of two elements, e.g., a verb and its object, in the sense of their occurrence dependence, or just their "unilateral occurrence dependence" is mapped onto the syntactic description of elliptical sentences through an empty slot.

6)   Bill passed Ø.   (Thomas 1979: 65)

But this is not quite so for non-realization. With the verb asserting itself as occurrence independent on its object, no empty slot can possibly inhere in (7).

7)   Bill's reading.   (Thomas 1979: 65)

Into Thomas'(1979) approach penetrates definitely more than a touch of confidence that it is the encounter between "syntactic occurrence dependence" and "contextual semantic dependence" that forms the gateway through which the "total elliptical relation" proceeds. But, surely, there is a substantial theme to be wrested from the notion of context, one that presents it as a content of linguistic elements, or otherwise a hint of the situational, the at times linguistically inexpressible.

To this consideration Warner (1993: 113) gives an extended, though unwarranted, rebuttal, the chief point of which is his walking us through examples of "apparent" ellipsis:

a)   You may start.
     (spoken instruction at beginning of an examination)
b)   I don't see why you even try.
     (lecturer commenting to student on fail-grade essay)

Fraught with meaning, they have part of their contents dissolved into situational hints; and so any call for overt representation or linguistic antecedents is preempted. In the deepest sense, such utterances cannot draw Warner's approval as genuine and legitimate elliptical ones, for no other reason than just their potential for being linguistically suspended in mid-air. That is not to say, though, that verbs like *try* or *start* never harden into full-blown victims of ellipsis; their far more generous equivalents *start to* and *try to*, always bending to purely "neighboring-text" solutions, i.e. ellipsis in its only intended sense, would be automatically discarded if substituted in (a) or (b).

4. Elliptical VPs

Alien to rigidities of interpretation, VP ellipsis, or rather the essence thereof, may on occasion lie partly outside the configuration of words in which it is caught, i.e. its antecedent. Therefore, Hardt (1999: 83) advocates that semantics be contracted into a dynamic view, which being a "data structure ... updated and accessed throughout the processing of discourse", posits not only "antecedents for proforms" but also other intervening contexts as the forces casting valid interpretations over the ensuing elliptical structures. In its flight from traditional models, dynamic semantics naturalizes the reciprocal relation of sentences to their context. It is an acknowledgement of a positioning of sentences within their current context to be assessed against it and, no less than that, to modify it.

Just how elliptical VPs fill themselves from the dynamic reality of context can be gauged from instances of "sloppy [unexpected] identity".

8)   Susan loves her cat. Jane does too.   (Hardt 1999: 185)

Here, the readings of the antecedent and the missing VP walk quite divergent paths, as follows:

Antecedent: *loves Susan's cat*
Ellipsed VP: *loves Jane's cat*

If we cut into the sequence of (8) to separate the two ways of our above relation, we will see that the "occurrence of Jane between the antecedent and the ellipsis site changes the context, so that the elided VP is interpreted with respect to a different context than the antecedent VP" (Hardt 1999: 185). Crucial to this account is a swing away from the strict antecedent meaning and toward a sloppy one, its integrity tied to the idea of *Discourse Center*, which marshals individu-

als or properties to occupy "position 0" in the discourse. When delivered into the hands of sloppy readings, discourse centers systematically stray from their original sites, and so in (8), the center shifts from *Susan* to *Jane* and the property of *loving u_0's cat*, "where u_0 is the discourse center defined in the input context" (Hardt 1999: 195), embraces its new interpretation.

When unloosed and played out, sloppy readings rarely infiltrate accounts other than Hardt's. He mentions *en passant* Sag/Williams proposal, wherein meanings register themselves in a static framework. This proposal stretches thin to accommodate sloppy readings for cases like (8) through soliciting the antecedent VP into the shape of *loves x's cat*, a formula flexible enough not to run counter to the sloppy reading due to its capability to "covary with the two subjects" (Hardt 1999: 196). Subject covariance, however, as the "prime mover" in sloppy identity, fails to hold its own against assaults of instances of more sophisticated VP ellipsis. To cite more examples of Hardt's (1999: 196):

9)   If Tom was having trouble in school, I would help him. If Harry was having trouble, I wouldn't.
10) Every boy hopes Professor Partee will like his work, but in Bill's case, I think she actually will.

Neither of the "sloppy variables" is bound by the subject of the antecedent or the ellipsed VP, and thus the Sag/Williams approach can hardly be expected to have a voice here. But the dynamic perspective, in the full measure of its generosity, through acts of center shifting from *Tom* to *Harry* in (9) and *Every boy* to *Bill* in (10), activates the sloppy interpretation.

Coming under intense scrutiny are two other proposals whose explanatory power in the case of (9) and (10) is evidenced to lead to not-so-promising end points.

Fiengo and May's (1994) quest is toward a "dependency theory". Sloppy readings only emerge into being if "structurally identical material" comes between "the two controllers" and the variables, of course in the wake of the absent VP's retrieval. While (9) finds a comfortable home within this approach, (10), sporting as it does its structural variety alongside the sloppy reading, expressly flouts it.

A weak point in Darlymple *et al.*'s (1991) equational account is that it, quite matter-of-factly, spans an uncertain space. With stress laid on the "parallel elements in the source and target", equations are framed that encapsulate the ties between those elements. As we waver in our resolve to choose one particular equation (there is an array of more or less restrictive options at our disposal), tension holds among all the possible choices, the criteria not a little obscure, materializing into arbitrary decisions and thereby creating a cause for erroneous analyses.

Stripping away approaches like clothes, Hardt (1999) maintains the power of his own dynamic one by launching into multiple ellipsis. In so complex an example, (11), two ellipses are unearthed:

11) John thinks he's smart, and Bill does too, although his wife doesn't.
(Hardt 1999: 200)

and so are the three meanings:

- across-the-board strict: *John thinks John is smart, Bill thinks John is smart, Bill's wife doesn't think John is smart.*
- across-the-board sloppy: *John thinks John is smart, Bill thinks Bill is smart, Bill's wife doesn't think she is smart.*
- mixed: *John thinks John is smart, Bill thinks Bill is smart, Bill's wife doesn't think Bill is smart.*

Whence comes the mixed reading? The answer is to be sought out within the nearly untrammeled possibility of the dynamic semantics: "the first ellipsis is preceded by a center shift, while the second ellipsis is not. This gives rise to a sloppy reading followed by a strict reading" (Hardt 1999: 200).

The logic emanating from such an explanation has no actual match in any of the other views. The Sag/Williams account deters their interpretation from rising above the horizontality of the across-the-board strict reading or the across-the-board sloppy one in light of the bound status conferred on the sloppy variables. In Darlymple *et al.*'s approach there is an additional mixed reading entering the sentence, which resolves itself into a purely theoretical construct whose existence is otiose and "dynamic" derivation unfeasible, given *Bill* as the shifted discourse center.

12) *John thinks John is smart, Bill thinks Bill is smart, Bill's wife doesn't think John is smart.

Although it edges out the mixed reading, Fiengo and May's (1994) view stops short of being generalized into an all-pervasive account. Remarkable here is the way in which their sloppy variables demand immersion in direct relation to their antecedents being mandatorily embedded in the same clauses. If this approach passes intacit through (11), (13) constitutes a crushing blow to its prestige. The third clause is innocent of any antecedent for the ellipsed *he*, which straightforwardly denies us glimpses of the obvious mixed reading beneath the structure.

13) John thought he should run the race, Bill did too, but the coach didn't.
(Hardt 1999: 202)

Hardt's (1999) theory acquires its resonance from gathering its tenets into a pattern equally applicable to NP and VP anaphora cases. Shackled by no flawed methodology, it gains the upper hand over alternative programs, for it filters through to any antecedent with a proform nestled within. Proforms flock toward sloppy readings whenever their controllers, by virtue of center shifts, impart new meanings to the context. An instance of NP anaphora, as yet untackled in this work, ensues, with a sloppy VP ellipsis as the proform and the center shift from *drinks* to *gambles*.

14) When Harry drinks, I always conceal my [belief that he shouldn't [VP]]. When he gambles, I can't conceal it.   (Hardt 1999: 208)

The theory has no question mark whatsoever written over it, even when a split antecedent crops up. That a regular antecedent of that kind is bodied forth through piecing together its parts is a fact whose recognition garners no laurels, e.g.

15) John₁ arrived and later Susan₂ arrived. They₁,₂ left together.
          (Hardt 1999: 208)

This idea evokes an analogous technique for VP ellipses whose interpretation is cast back upon split antecedents with the aid of indices attached to proforms. What actually happens to VP ellipsis beset by the impact of split antecedents is that it ascends to a dimension more intricate than a mere reconstruction and conjunction of ellipsed phrases – a state to which Fiengo and May cavalierly reduce it. To bulwark the claim, Hardt (1999: 209) grounds the reading of (16):

16) I thought Harry went to nice restaurants and I thought he left big tips. It turns out he doesn't.

as *Harry neither goes to nice restaurants nor leaves big tips*. Negation, however, in its disposition of awareness between linguistic absence and presence, would unleash a disjoint interpretation if (16) read: *It turns out he doesn't go to nice restaurants and leave big tips*. This version, with the conjoined antecedents making their appearance, still rings true if *Harry goes to nice restaurants and doesn't leave big tips*.

On top of split antecedents, linear constraints on VP and NP anaphora sound no discordant note in Hardt's view. Undoubtedly, ellipsed phrases are deployed as not far, if at all, removed from ordinary anaphoric expressions; undoubtedly, too, both of them fix their antecedents in the tight grip of the preceding text and beyond the touch of the discourse that follows. Shifted onto the dynamic approach is also the weight of the "Backwards Anaphora Constraint", which or-

ders anaphoric expressions through its own "punctuation", so that they do not precede antecedents they happen to command.

17) [S₁Because [S₂Sue didn't], John ate meat].
18) *[S₁Sue didn't because [S₂John ate meat].
          (Hardt 1999: 213)

If the principle of linearity cuts athwart sloppy identity, it does so to the point that all sloppy readings radiate from a central assumption that an anaphor be located to the right of its controllers. In a vision this strict, the elliptical VP in (19) can shore up no reading of the type *vote for Harry*, "since the occurrence of *Harry* is subsequent to the VP ellipsis" (Hardt 1999: 213).

19) Tom's always causing me problems.
    I voted for him last year and Tom complained.
    I didn't this year and Harry complained.
          (Hardt 1999: 213)

Possessed of such a prescript is neither Darlymple *et al.'s* nor Fiengo and May's (1994) approach. The equational view constructs a *modus vivendi* with the *vote for Harry* meaning through looking upon *Tom* and *Harry* as "parallel elements" and "potential controllers for a sloppy reading" (Hardt 1999: 213). Fiengo and May's theory is trapped into conceding that the content separating *him* from *Tom* and that separating *him* from *Harry* are structurally identical.

5. Conclusion

Now that we have gained a retrospect on how theories of grammar bend ellipsis to their service, what remains is to acknowledge the theme, asserting itself amidst guarantees of prosperity, that to probe the veil of mystery that surrounds elliptical constructions is to individuate them through patterns of unique surface structure description. Always a perfect screen for projection of language extricated from verbosity, ellipsis calls up and valorizes the dynamic role of context, whether linguistic or non-linguistic. And so it comes from a premeditated, but not mandatory, design and spins a web of dependencies which would inevitably fold back into the fabric of the text if the overt representations were employed instead. Therefore, only from a much restrictive angle can the deletionist approach or the appellation of obligatory ellipsis be diagnosed with anything but disquieting ineffectuality.

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