Verbal and Clausal Ellipsis
in English and Japanese

Noriko Kusaki

0. Introduction

In pragmatic terms ellipsis is a means of avoiding redundancy of expression.\(^1\) It contributes to keeping cohesion. According to M. A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hassan, "it [cohesion] refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text."\(^2\) Therefore an elliptical item should be recoverable from the text. It is to be filled with some other item from elsewhere.

In this paper I will discuss ellipsis concerning verbal groups. Finite verbal operators and modal operators in themselves play an important role in English while they in themselves cannot work well in Japanese. I will examine how this characteristic affects the structure of ellipsis.

I. Verbal Ellipsis in English

Verbal ellipsis means ellipsis within the verbal group. "It is defined as a verbal group whose structure does not fully express its systemic features."\(^3\) The principal systemic features are:

(A) Finiteness: finite or non-finite
   if finite: indicative or imperative
   if indicative: modal or non-modal
(B) Polarity: positive or negative, and marked or unmarked
(C) Voice: active or passive
(D) Tense: past or present or future

There is an additional system.

(E) Contrast: contrastive or non-contrastive

The followings are typical examples of verbal ellipsis:

(1) a. Have you been swimming? ——Yes, I have.
    b. What have you been doing? ——Swimming.

*Have* in (1a) stands for *have been swimming*, and *swimming* in (1b) could be interpreted only as *I have been swimming*. These elliptical forms have the features finite, positive, active, and present. These selections are recovered from presupposition. For the verbal group, the system gives the simplest way of explaining the fact of ellipsis. Thus I will discuss verbal ellipsis on the basis of systems listed above.

It is difficult to say just by looking at a verbal group whether it is elliptical or not. It is necessary to consider the "co-text."

(2) a. I’ve decided to leave. ——I hope you’re going to have second thoughts.
    a’. I haven’t finished it yet. ——I hope you’re going to have by tomorrow.
    b. Did Jane know? ——No, but Mary did.
    b’. Did Jane know? ——Yes, she did.

(2a and 2b) are non-elliptical whereas (2a’ and 2b’) are elliptical. *Did* in (2b) is replaced by *knew* whereas *she did* in (2b’) stands for *she did know.*
However, a verbal group which consists of a modal operator only is always elliptical. The same is the case with a verbal group consisting of the word *to*, a marker of the infinitive. For example,

(3) I'd better see him. I don't really want to.

So far lexical ellipsis has been explained. It is ellipsis from the right and may extend leftward to the first word in the verbal group. There is another type of ellipsis, which involves the omission of operators and following elements except the lexical verb. In operator ellipsis we always omit the subject.

Operator ellipsis across clauses occurs mainly in such sequence as question and answer as in (1b) and (4).

(4) a. Has she been crying? — No, laughing.
   b. What have you been doing? — Being chased by a bull.

In most cases of operator ellipsis, the entire selection within systems but the lexical verb is presupposed as in (1b). However in the context of yes/no question, which requires the polarity to be supplied, the polarity cannot be presupposed as in (4a). Occasionally the voice is being repudiated. In such a case if the elliptical group is passive, the word *be* must be present as in (4b).

Any elliptical verbal group carries over systemic selections from the group that it presupposes. As a summary of verbal ellipsis, I will show the general principles as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Polarity</th>
<th>Lexical ellipsis</th>
<th>Operator ellipsis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>inapplicable</td>
<td>not presupposed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(always expressed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finiteness and modality</th>
<th>inapplicable (always expressed)</th>
<th>presupposed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>presupposed</td>
<td>presupposed (can be repudiated under certain conditions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tense</td>
<td>not presupposed</td>
<td>presupposed unless repudiated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexical verb</td>
<td>presupposed</td>
<td>inapplicable (always expressed)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Verbal ellipsis often entails the omission of other elements in the clause besides verbal ones. I will next look at the verbal ellipsis from another angle.

II. Clausal Ellipsis in English

When we regard the clause in English as an exchange of information, the clause consists of two parts: Mood (or Modal element) and Residue (or Propositional element). Mood consists of the Subject, which is a nominal group, and the Finite element, which is part of a verbal group.
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Thus in *he could swim*, *he* is Subject, *could* is Finite, and *swim* is Residue.

The two types of verbal ellipsis, lexical and operator ellipsis, are derived from those two major divisions of the clause: Mood and Residue. For example,

(5) a. What was the Duke going to do? ---Plant a row of poplars in the park.
   b. Who was going to plant a row of poplars in the park? ---
      The Duke was.

(5a) is modal ellipsis and (5b) is propositional ellipsis. In modal ellipsis, the Mood and the polarity is determined and the Subject is presupposed. Typically modal ellipsis is found in response to the question asking "*what ... do?*" On the other hand, propositional ellipsis occurs in the clause where the Mood and the polarity are the principal components of the message: that is, typically responses to statements and yes/no questions. It also occurs in response to WH-questions where the Subject is the unknown elements as in (5b).

In English it is impossible to leave out the Complement while retaining the Predicator. Therefore we can find a general restriction on ellipsis: "it is not possible to omit single elements from the structure of the clause," which is shown as follows:

(6) The Duke has planted poplars in the park.

Presupposing: we have:

(a) The Duke He has planted poplars in the park.
(b) poplars The Duke has planted them in the park.
(c) in the park The Duke has planted poplars there.

(7) Does Sandra clean the windows? ---She cleans for me when I’m out.
In (7) the response cannot be elliptical; it cannot mean *she cleans the windows for me*.

In the response to a yes/no question, a full sentence is not required.

(8) Is John an engineering student?
   a. Yes. He is an engineering student.
   b. No. He isn’t an engineering student.

Although such answers are possible, they “may give the listener the impression that the speaker is annoyed by the question.” A more natural form is as follows: “Yes,” “Yes, I am,” “No, I’m not,” “Sometimes he does,” “Perhaps she has,” “Possibly they might,” and so on. The Mood itself can be an answer. Thus the question (8) can be answered simply by “he is,” or “he isn’t.”

The response to a WH-question needs a particular item which is the missing information in the clause of the question. The respondent knows the function of the item because the questioner has already given the total structure of the clause the respondent will make. So the respondent merely fills in the blanks. The WH-expression indicates not only the function of the missing item but also various other things about it. For example, if the missing item is a circumstance, the WH-expression indicates whether it is time, place, cause, manner, and so on (*when, where, why, how, what time, what with, like what, which way, for whose sake, and etc.*).

The simplest way of answering is to fill the blanks with the appropriate nominal, adverbial, or prepositional group: for example,

(9) a. What did you see then? — A sparrow.
c. Till what time are you staying? — Half past three.
d. Whose gloves are these? — Sally's.
e. What did you draw it with? — A pencil.

The principle of ellipsis in the response to WH-question is the same as that in the answer to a yes/no question. In the simplest response, the speaker gives only information that the question calls for. Since the most important information is polarity in a yes/no question, the answer specifies the polarity and presupposes the remainder of the clause. In a WH-question, the required information is the item which has a particular function; the answer specifies it and presupposes all else.

As in like the case of yes/no questions, WH-questions have longer elliptical forms as answer. If the WH-element is Subject, the answer may have a propositional ellipsis. Whether the WH-element is Subject or not, the answer could have a form without ellipsis. We can also find the following forms:

\[(9)\ c'. \text{Till half past three.} \\
d'. \text{Sally's gloves.} \\
e'. \text{With a pencil.}\]

There is no WH-verb in English so that, using the proverb do, we can ask the question: \textit{what are you doing}? This question is appropriately answered by a clause with modal ellipsis, as shown in

\[(10)\ \text{What are you doing with the eggs?} — \text{Poaching them.}\]

III. Verbal and Clausal Ellipsis in Japanese

Under verbal ellipsis Halliday and Hassan include all instances of ellipsis in the verbal group. However, both types of verbal ellipsis, oper-
ator ellipsis and lexical ellipsis, involve the ellipsis of the related clause elements. Operator ellipsis involves the omission of the whole modal element in the clause, and lexical ellipsis involves the omission of the propositional element. The structure of the clause *the cat won’t catch mice in winter* is illustrated as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>the cat</th>
<th>won’t</th>
<th>catch</th>
<th>mice</th>
<th>in winter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Modal</strong></td>
<td><strong>Propositional</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Predicator</td>
<td>Complement</td>
<td>Adjunct</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nominal group</td>
<td>verbal group</td>
<td>nominal group</td>
<td>prepositional group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In most cases we can find the following correspondence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clause</th>
<th>Verbal group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>modal ellipsis</td>
<td>operator ellipsis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>propositional ellipsis</td>
<td>lexical ellipsis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Therefore I will discuss these two types of ellipsis together.

A verbal group, if finite, expresses its finiteness in the first word. It consists of a finite form of the lexical verb only, or it begins with a finite verbal operator:

(I) am, is, are; was, were [i.e. finite forms of be]
(II) have, has; had [i.e. finite forms of have]
(III) do, does; did
(IV) shall, will
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(V) used (to)

or a modal operator:

(VI) shall, will, should, would, can, could, may, might, must, ought (to)

(VII) am to, is to, are to; was to, were to [i.e. finite forms of be, plus to]

(VIII) need, dare

Those operators play an important role in propositional ellipsis in English. However, there is no finite verbal operator in Japanese. This fact has an influence on the structure undergone verbal or clausal ellipsis in Japanese.

(11) a. Were you reading a book when he entered the room?
   b. Yes, I was.
   c. anata wa kare ga heya ni haittekita toki hon o yondeimasita ka?
   d. hai yondeimasita.

(12) a. Have you ever been to Nagoya?
   b. No, I haven’t.
   c. anata wa Nagoya ni ittakoto ga arimasu ka?
   d. iie arimasen.

(13) a. Have you already written a letter to Miki?
   b. Yes, I have.
   c. anata wa mō Miki ni tegami o kakimasita ka?
   d. hai kakimasita.

(14) a. Did he take a medicine yesterday?
   b. No, he didn’t.
   c. kare wa kinō kusuri o nomimasita ka?
   d. iie nomimasendesita.

(15) a. Will it rain tomorrow?
   b. Perhaps it will.
c. *asu ame ga furudeshō ka?*

d. *furudeshō.*

(16) a. Did you use to play in the park?
   b. Yes, I used to.
   c. *anata wa katute yoku kōen de asobimasita ka?*
   d. *hai yoku asondamonodesita.*

As is showo in (11), (12), (13), (14), (15), and (16), lexical verb in each clause is not omitted in Japanese. Susumu Kuno proposes the following rule:

\[\text{(17) Rule 1: The elements recoverable from the context except lexical verbs are omitted.}\]

This rule does not work in the responses to a WH-question whose missing information is not expressed by a verbal group.

However, there are some exceptions of Rule 1. In the case of a complex verb\(^{11}\) which consists of noun plus suru, for example, *benkyō-suru*, *sanpo-suru*, and *kekkon-suru*, the part of the noun can be omitted as in (18).

\[\text{(18) a. anata wa kinō sanposimasita ka?} \]
\[----\text{hai simasita.} \]
\[\text{b. koko de ryōgaedekimasu ka?} \]
\[----\text{hai dekimasu.} \]

The verb *ryōgaedekiru* in (18b) derives from complex verb *ryōgaesuru.\(^{12}\)

\[\text{(19) a. When a child is doing a jigsaw puzzle, his friend asks him:} \]
\[\text{dekiru no?} \]
\[----\text{dekiru yo.} \]
\[\text{b. Masao wa furansugo ga dekimasu ka?} \]
\[----\text{hai kare wa dekimasu.} \]
As in (19a and b), dekiri sometimes functions as a lexical verb. In addition, there is another type of example.

(20) a. Has Tom already arrived at the station?
    b. Not yet.
    c. Tomu wa mō eki ni tukimasita ka?
    d. iie mada desu.

In (20) the most important information is whether the action has finished or not because Tom is to arrive at the station. In Japanese there is a word representing the imperfection of the action, mada, and it can work without help of a lexical verb. Moreover I can find exceptions of Rule 1 in colloquial Japanese.

(21) a. asita yuki ga furukamosirena ne.
     ——kamosirena ne.
    b. asita wa harerudaro ne.
     ——darō ne.

The responses in (21a and b) seem like a question tag. Repeating a modal element, the respondent confirms and consents the proposition the first speaker gave.

In the case of operator ellipsis in English,

(22) a. What are you doing?
    ——Having dinner.
    b. What will you be doing about this time tomorrow?
    ——Having dinner.

tense is presupposed, but in Japanese it isn’t.

(23) a. anata wa ima nani o siteimasu ka?
The response in (23b), -transparent- $\text{yūsyoku o totteimasu}$, is acceptable because it expresses an action at the definite future time as a plan. This is the present tense in form but the future in meaning. We cannot regard it as an elliptical form. In principle, operator ellipsis does not occur in Japanese since polarity, modality, voice, and tense must be expressed even in the case where operator ellipsis occurs in English. However, observe the following examples.

(24) a. anata wa kinō no yūgata nanisiteita no?
   $\text{---benkyō da yo.}$

b. nanisiteiru no?
   $\text{---benkyō da yo.}$

These examples are observed in colloquial Japanese. A complex verb is divided into two parts: noun and -transparent-suru, and either can be omitted, depending on the context.

The response to a WH-question in Japanese as well as in English requires a particular item which is a missing information in the question. Because the respondent has already known the function of the item, he/she merely fills in the blank. I translate the clause in (9) into Japanese as follows:

(25) a. anata wa sono toki nani o mitanodesu ka?
   $\text{---tubame.}$

b. ikuradesuka?
---gopondo.

c. \textit{nanzimade taizaisiteirunodesuka?}  
---sanzihan.

d. \textit{korera wa dare no gurôbudesuka?}  
---Sarii no.

e. \textit{nani de sore o kitanodesuka?}  
---enpitu.

These answers are simplest; the speaker provides only information that the first speaker calls for. This fits in the maxim of quantity proposed by H. Paul Grice: "make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)"\textsuperscript{14} and "do not make your contribution more informative than is required."\textsuperscript{15} However, as for (25c and e), to avoid ambiguity we had better say as follows:

\begin{align*}
&\text{(25) c'. sanzihan made.} \\
&e'. \textit{enpitu de.}
\end{align*}

Though "till" and "with" are recoverable from the question, the most important information of the answer to each question is "till what time" and "with what." If a respondent answers like in (25c and e), it sounds rude. This phenomenon can be explained as follows: the element which is focus of the clause, even if it is recoverable from the context, can remain.\textsuperscript{16}

The following answers are more often found than those in (25).

\begin{align*}
&\text{(26) a. tubame da. / tubame desu.} \\
&\text{b. gopondo da. / gopondo desu.} \\
&\text{c. sanzi made da. / sanzi made desu.} \\
&\text{d. Sarii no da. / Sarii no desu.} \\
&\text{e. enpitu da. / enpitu desu.}
\end{align*}
desu is the politier form of da. We add da or desu to the required minimum information when the verb is omitted.\(^{17}\)

Because a lexical verb tends to remain in Japanese even if it is recoverable, we can say as follows:

\[27\]

\(\begin{align*}
\text{a. } & \text{tubame o mimasita. } \\
\text{b. } & \text{gopondo kakarimasita. } \\
\text{c. } & \text{sanzihan made taizaisimasu. } \\
\text{e. } & \text{enpitu de kakimasita. } \\
\end{align*}\)

There is no lexical verb expressing ownership.

As we can infer from the preceding discussion, the principle of the ellipsis in Japanese is as follows:

\[28\] The recoverable elements without the focus of the clause are all omitted or all remain.\(^{18}\)

For example, observe in (29).

\[29\]

\(\begin{align*}
\text{a. } & \text{Hanako ga umareta no wa doko desu ka? } \\
\text{b. } & \text{Nagano desu. } \\
\text{c. } & \text{Hanako ga umareta no wa Nagano desu. } \\
\text{d. } & \text{umareta no wa Nagano desu. } \\
\end{align*}\)

In (29b), all words except the required minimum item are omitted, and in (29c) no ellipsis occur. Both are direct responses to the question in (29a). There is no implication in them. On the other hand the response in (29d), which is omitted partially, implies the contrast. The hearers expect that such a clause as sodatta no wa Nara desu follows it.

I will discuss another example here.

\[30\]

\(\begin{align*}
\text{a. } & \text{saikin Hanako ni aimasita ka? } \\
\end{align*}\)
b. *hai aimasita.*

? c. *hai Hanako ni aimasita.*

It is difficult to accept the response in (30c) because we cannot infer a contrastive item to Hanako in this context. However, for example, in the following situation: where the respondent does not expect the questioner to refer to Hanako at all,

\[(31)\]

a. *saikin Hanako ni aimasita ka?*

b. *aa Hanako, Hanako ni aimasita yo.*

the response in (31b) is relevant. we cannot think of ellipsis without taking context into consideration.

IV. Conclusion

Thus far I have examined the difference between English and Japanese, but here I would like to point out a common principle of ellipsis between them. Observe the verbal not clausal elliptical responses.

\[(32)\]

a. [presupposed clause]
The cat won't catch mice in winter.

b. [operator ellipsis; Subject repudiated: "nor will the dog chase rabbits in winter"]

---Nor the dog chase rabbits.

c. [lexical ellipsis; Complement repudiated: "it will catch birds in winter"]

---It will birds.

d. [lexical ellipsis; Adjunct repudiated: "it will catch mice in summer"]

---It will in summer.

If there is verbal ellipsis, any element in the clause that is not contrastive
with that in the presupposed clause must be omitted. After uttering (32a) we cannot say as follows:

* e. —Nor the cat chase birds.
* f. —It will birds in winter.
* g. —It will mice in summer.

The principle of ellipsis is that “although the structural elements themselves are not present in the elliptical item, the features that are realized by these elements ARE present.”¹⁹ For example, an elliptical clause without Complement or Adjunct can take over the features realized by these elements ——type of transitivity; time, place, manner, and so on ——in the presupposed clause. Therefore if the elliptical clause makes a different selection within these features, the feature must be expressed overtly. This principle holds true in Japanese though such ellipsis as I showed above does not occur since operator, if any, and lexical verb tend to work together.

Notes

4. Modal operators are can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might, must, ought to, and is to. None of them function as lexical verbs.
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15. Ibid., p. 45.


17. Ibid., pp. 8–9.
