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Some remarks on Sanders' typology of elliptical coordinations

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Abstract

Starting with Ross (1970), various proposals have been made to classify elliptical coordinations and to characterize different languages according to the types of ellipses which they admit. Sanders (1977) discusses four of these proposals, shows that they are inadequate on various grounds and proposes a fifth typology whose central claim is 'evidently correct', as he states (p. 258). In the following, I shall briefly outline this typology and then show that it is inadequate, too. Since there is only one language 1 know — German — I will take all my examples from this language. Moreover, all examples will be straightforward and easy to be judged.

1. Sanders' typology

Sanders assumes that, as a rule, the patterns of coordinate ellipsis may be stated in purely positional terms; it does not matter whether there is a verb or a NP in a specific position — say in the final position of the first conjunct; there are some exceptions to this principle of 'category-independence'; they play no role in the typology, and we will not discuss them in what follows. In particular, Sanders says: "There seems to be no empirical basis … for distinguishing … between the ellipsis of verbs in coordinations and the ellipsis of verbal arguments' (p. 248). All our examples given later on are of this kind. Six relevant positions are distinguished. They are labelled A, B, C, D, E, F, respectively, and are best illustrated by (I):

(I)

In the following general schema
$[... [A\ B\ C]_w\ \&\ [D\ E\ F]_w ...]_w$
'ABC' is a *preceding conjunct*

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'DEF' is a *following conjunct*
'A' and 'D' are *initial sequences*
'C and 'F' *are final sequences*
'B' and 'E' (where A, C, D, F are non-null) are *medial sequences,* and '&' is (possibly null) *coordinating conjunction* (p. 242/3).

Only 'and'-coordinations are considered, but there is no restriction on what category w might be, except that the semantic function of both conjuncts in discourse has to be identical (p. 243). This is somewhat misleading, since only coordination of clauses is taken into account. There is a wide range of elliptical phenomena in other types of coordination, for example conjoined NPs, but applying to them the rules of clause-ellipsis would lead to grossly misleading results. This is obvious and needs no exemplification. Probably, Sanders did not want to include these cases, but his general definition does not exclude them.

Languages may be classified according to the position in which they allow ellipsis. English, for example, allows E-ellipsis, as the classical gapping-rule shows:

(2) John loves Mary and Peter (loves) Kate.

There are other possibilities, too, like D or C; others are excluded in English, like A or F. In general, a language may be characterized by any subset of {A, B, D, D, E, F}, ranging from the empty set — i.e. no ellipsis at all — to ellipsis in all positions; there are 2^6, i.e. 64, such subsets, but according to Sanders, only 6 of them are used. They are:

(3)
1. {D, C} example: Chinese
2. {D, C, E} example: English, Japanese
3. {D, E, F} example: Quechua
4. {C, D, E, F} example: Russian
5. {B, C, D, E, F} example: Hindi, Zapotec
6. {A, B, C, D, E, F} example: Tojolabal

Hence, there is at least one language which allows for ellipsis in all positions, but no language without ellipsis. Position A underlies the most severe restrictions — it only occurs in 6. — whereas D is free for ellipsis in all languages. Obviously, there are a number of cooccurences, e.g. if a language allows for ellipsis in E, it allows for ellipsis in F, but not vice versa. These cooccurrences may be stated in terms of implicational relations; they are summarized in the following diagram, where '*X -> *Y' is to be read 'If no ellipsis in position X, then no ellipsis in position Y':

(4) *C → *B → *A
*E → *F

The 'positive' counterpart is (5):

(5) A → B → C → D
F → E

i.e. if there is ellipsis in A, there is ellipsis in B, etc.

These implicational relations permit a simplified typological characterization. Thus, it suffices to say that English does not allow for ellipsis in F; it automatically follows that it does not allow for ellipsis in B or in A, either; any position which is not excluded is possible. The six types of (3) may then be characterized as *E, *F, *C, *B, *A and 'no restriction', respectively. I think that Sanders' typology is by far the most powerful attempt in classifying languages according to their ellipsis characteristics, but there are some serious problems with it, too. In the next section, I shall outline two of them.

2. Inadequacy

The principle of category independence which underlies the whole typology is wrong. It may be sufficient to consider two cases.

a. One of the most common cases of ellipsis in German is classical 'gapping', i.e. V-deletion in position E:

(6) Der Vater trank einen Wein und der Onkel (trank) einen Schnaps.

E-ellipsis is impossible, however, if NP is in that position, no matter whether it is S or O; those cases would be possible in subordinate clauses.

(7) *weil der Vater einen Wein trank und der Onkel (einen Wein) zurückwies
(8) *weil den Wein der Vater trank und den Schnaps (der Vater) zurückwies

b. Similarly, German has F-ellipsis for (inflected) verbs, but not for NPs:

(9) weil der Vater Bier trank und der Onkel Wein (trank)
(10) *der Vater trank Bier und der Onkel bestellte (Bier).

Both cases are a simple consequence of a very general rule of ellipsis in German: a verb — or rather the inflected part of a verb — may drop in the second conjunct, independent of whether it is in position D (e.g. in

questions), in position E (e.g. in main clauses), or in position F (e.g. in subordinate clauses). No such rule holds for NPs. Note that this asymmetry between V and NP does not belong to the exceptions of the category-independence principle Sanders mentions.

This immediately raises the question whether German has E-ellipsis and F-ellipsis or not. Given that the category independence principle does not hold, should we then say that a language has X-ellipsis, if X is an ellipsis site for some categories, but not for all, or should we say that it does not? Both alternatives are unsatisfactory:

Case (i): Assume that German has E and F. Then, according to (4), B is not excluded. But it definitely is:

(11) *der Vater (trank) Bier und der Onkel trank Wein

Thus, (4) is wrong.

Case (ii): Assume that German does not have E and F. But then, one of the most valient ellipsis rules of German would be excluded, namely normal 'gapping'. This does not falsify the typology as such, but a typology which neglects even the most straightforward cases does not seem fully satisfactory.

Incidentally, a similar asymmetry between V and NP for position E seems to exist in English. It is difficult to find straighforward examples, since the position of V is less flexible than in German. One possibility is topicalizations:

(12) *John I love and Peter (I) hate

Another possibility is questions:

(13) *Is John a rich man and has (John) a big house?

It seems to me that E-el)ipsis is not possible in these cases. Hence, English either has E (because of usual 'gapping'), and it should have B-ellipsis, too, which it definitely has not, or else it has *E, and then 'gapping' does not count for the typology.

Let me turn now to another argument. Sanders' typology describes ellipsis for different positions as if its application would be independent. That is, a language is attributed X for all utterances, no matter whether Y has been applied in the same utterance or not. This is clearly inadequate in some straightforward cases. There is a general rule in German, which allows omission of an NP in D, E, F — actually, in any position in the second conjunct — IF the inflected part of V is omitted in this conjunct, too.

(14) der Vater gab der Mutter ein Buch und der Onkel (gab) der Tante (ein Buch)
(15) weil der Vater der Mutter ein Buch gab und der Onkel (der Mutter) ein Bild (gab)

Examples of this sort don't falsify the claims made by the typology, since nothing at all is said about them, but they again raise the question whether German has ellipsis in F or not (similarly in E). Unless there is a clear and convincing procedure to decide this question, it is simply pointless to argue about whether the typology is correct or not.

It has been established so far, that German allows omission of a verb (or rather its inflected part) in any position in the second conjunct, and that any NP may be omitted there provided the verb has gone. German also has C-ellipsis ('right peripheral ellipsis') as well as D-ellipsis ('left peripheral ellipsis'). If in a coordination like S V O & S V O, everything but S is identical, two types of ellipsis are possible. In:

(16) Die Eltern lieben die Kinder und die Großeltern lieben die Kinder

C-ellipsis leads to:

(17) Die Eltern und die Großeltern lieben die Kinder

and E + F-ellipsis leads to:

(18) Die Eltern lieben die Kinder und die Großeltern.

Note first that in (16) *lieben die Kinder* has to be treated as one position, in the first conjunct, since there is no B-ellipsis in German; but the same sequence occupies two positions in the second conjunct; moreover, if the sentence were:

(19) Die Eltern lieben die Kinder und die Großeltern hassen die Kinder

the same sequence would occupy two positions (B and C) in the first conjunct, simply because E is filled in a different way. Hence, the concept of 'position' needs a more precise definition, since what a 'position' is, clearly depends on how it is 'filled' and what other stretches of the same utterance look like.

There is a more important point, however, with these examples; (17) and (18) are not equivalent; (18) is possible only if both *Eltern* and *Großeltern* are heavily stressed; in (17), they need not be stressed, though they may be; it is even possible, that just one of them is stressed. What is stressed and what is not, is not arbitrary, of course, but it expresses certain ill-understood properties of information distribution. But in any event, it seems obvious that there is no point in stating that a language has X-

ellipsis or has no X-ellipsis; this clearly depends on a set of additional criteria. Making such a decision without further qualifications, as Sanders' typology necessarily does, is just as misleading as classifying a language as SVO without saying that this only holds for main clauses. (Typologies of this kind may be useful as a superficial ordering device, like decimal classification in libraries, but they fail to reflect the interesting general properties of language.)[1]

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Note

1. Two anonymous referees helped me with stylistic corrections. They also plunged me into a deep confusion concerning the last sentence, which one of them found 'unwarranted' and the other one 'nice and clearly true' (thanks, in any case). After thinking a while about whether it could be maintained or not, 1 concluded by making it optional and leaving the decision to the gentle reader.

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