

The Functions of Ellipsis in English

英語における省略文のはたらき

Kayoko SHIBATA

柴田 かよ子

<Abstract>

The purpose of this research is to reveal functions of ellipsis in the discourse in English. Previous studies have suggested that the ellipsis has certain functions, for instance, “supplying of an affirmative or negative response” (Ricento, 1987: 765), “elaboration or commentary on a proximal utterance” (Ricento, 1987: 765), and “echoic responses” (Ricento, 1987: 766; Mackenzie, 1998: 280). In addition to these, this research has tried to examine another function, utilizing the transcript of the movie and children’s story book with a CD. As a result of the investigation, this paper found that the function of emphasis was observed in the discourse when the subject ellipsis occurred. Furthermore, we suggest that the function of emphasis is seen in the specific discourse patterns.

Key words: emphasis, giving a list, suspiciously repeating, responding to questions, providing new information

1. Introduction

It is often observed that the phenomena of the ellipsis occur in the daily conversation in English. “The law of least effort”¹ (Zipf, 1949) is indicated as one of the reasons such phenomena occur. Besides “the law of least effort” (Zipf, 1949), several factors suggested in the previous studies involve “intimacy” (Nariyama, 2006), correlation with fixed expressions (Mackenzie, 1998; Nariyama, 2004) and conversation style (McCarthy & Carter, 1995).

On the other hand, functions of ellipsis in English have been rarely discussed. Previous studies pointed out some functions such as “supplying of an affirmative or negative response” (Ricento, 1987: 765) and “elaboration or commentary on a proximal utterance” (Ricento, 1987: 765). This paper suggests that we should add another function in addition to those, that is to say, the function of emphasis in the discourse. This research has attempted to reveal that an emphasis occurs in the four types of discourse patterns such as 1) giving a list of phrases, 2) suspiciously repeating what the previous speaker said in an interrogative sentence, 3) providing new information² (Ricento, 1987: 771) and 4) responding to questions, when the ellipsis happens.

2. The Ellipsis

To begin with, it is essential to confirm the types of ellipsis. According to McCarthy & Carter (1995)

and Quirk et al. (1985), both categorize ellipsis into three kinds: situational ellipsis, textual ellipsis, and structural ellipsis. With regard to the situational ellipsis, McCarthy & Carter (1995: 145-146) suggest that situational ellipsis often occurs in the service-encounter data, casual data, and language-in-action data. Furthermore, it is suggested that the implicit subject can be retrieved, judging from the immediate situation of the sentence. The following is one of the examples for the situational ellipsis.

- (1) “They come to us,” she whispered. “Looks like it.” (COHA: 2009: FIC)

In (1), the subject is eliminated in the underlined second sentence *Looks like it*. Judging from the immediate context, the implicit subject *it* can be retrieved. The subject *it* in this case shows the situation where “they come to us.” Therefore, this type of ellipsis is called situational ellipsis.

Another type, textual ellipsis, is recognized as follows: textual ellipsis is characterized by retrievability from the text itself (McCarthy & Carter, 1995: 145; Halliday & Hasan, 1976: 144; Quirk et al., 1985: 884), which can be retrieved in an anaphoric or cataphoric way. The following is an example of textual ellipsis:

- (2) a: Can you hear the sound?
b: Yes, I think I can.

In (2b) in the discourse *Yes, I think I can*, the item which follows *can* is *hear the sound*. It is retrievable from the previous text. Therefore, it is called textual ellipsis.

Concerning structural ellipsis, it is noted that “structural ellipsis occurs when a purely structural element is omitted” (McCarthy & Carter, 1995: 145). Example (3) is a type of structural ellipsis.

- (3) I’m surprised you visited me.

In (3), it can be understood that the conjunction “that” is omitted following *I’m surprised*. Not to mention, it is inevitable to have the knowledge of the English structure in order to recover the conjunction. Thus, although we have observed that there are three kinds of ellipsis, this study mainly focuses on textual ellipsis and situational ellipsis.

3. Previous Studies

To date, previous studies have suggested that there are certain functions of ellipsis. As mentioned earlier, some of them include: “supplying of an affirmative or negative response” (Ricento, 1987: 765) (see (4) below); “elaboration or commentary on a proximal utterance” (Ricento, 1987: 765-766) (see (5) below); “echoic responses” (Ricento, 1987: 766; Mackenzie, 1998: 280) (see (6) below); “soften[ing] the implicatures by creating an indirect request/suggestion, even when the intended referent is perfectly

clear” (Nariyama, 2004: 249) (see (7) below). The following are some of the examples of those. The letter (i.e., C, L, S...) before each utterance shows the initials of each speaker’s respective name.

(4) Supplying of an affirmative or negative response

(From the ‘Pear Film’ conversation).

C: Anoth-this is like, o.k. Are you hearing anything?

L: Oh yeah.

S: *Just things hitting the ground or,*

‘ya know the bi-bike on the road.

(Ricento, 1987: 765)

In (4), the utterance by the speaker S, *Just things hitting the ground* is an elliptical clause. The original sentence can be recognized as either “I’m hearing just things hitting the ground” or “Just things are hitting the ground.” The function of this clause supplies an affirmative response to the speaker C.

(5) Elaboration or commentary on a proximal utterance (From ‘Party for the Teacher’).

B: Guess what it is.

C: Water. Does it have water in it? (Opening the present)

B: Formaldehyde.

M: Oh dear!

T: Oh no!

M: Barbara, where do you get these?

B: Those are Japanese.

C: That’s really great.

T: *Packed-in-formaldehyde Tunafish!*

C: *Must be.*

(Ricento, 1987: 765-766)

In (5), the conversation is taken place in the situation where a speaker B gives a present to another one C. The ellipsis occurs in the utterance by C in the last sentence *Must be*. When the eliminated words are retrieved, it will be “It must be packed in formaldehyde Tunafish.” This sentence is a commentary on the previous utterance mentioned by T.

(6) Echoic responses (From ‘Party for the Teacher’)

C: No, I’d rather have it that way. I hated the first 4 weeks of class because— I feel very uneasy when I just know that people don’t want to talk to each other, they don’t want to talk to me... they’re ... you know...

B: I thought the first 4 weeks were really interesting. I mean, I was fascinated by the language.

C: I just didn’t like it people-wise.

Well. There are limits, there are days when I don't want to be disturbed.

E: Oh sure. Like Friday.

C: *Like Friday.*

M: *Like Friday.*

(Ricento, 1987: 766)

In (6), in the last utterances by C and M, the same expression is repeated when the ellipsis occurs. It can be considered that the original sentence is that “there are days when I don't want to be disturbed like Friday.”

(7) Soften[ing] the implicatures by creating an indirect request/suggestion

A: *Gotta have a coffee.*

(Nariyama, 2004: 249)

In (7), concerning the utterance *Gotta have a coffee*, Nariyama (2004: 249) mentions that “this implicit referent, by under-specifying the subject, allows one to avoid the use of a direct speech act and downplays one's responsibility/accusation/self-centeredness; it softens the implicatures by creating an indirect request/suggestion to pick up on the implicature.”

Thus, such functions which the ellipsis has in the discourse have been discussed in the previous studies. Judging from those, we can understand that the ellipsis in English is not just the omission of the words but a way to express what a speaker wants to say using some implicature. In the following section, we would like to discuss another function of ellipsis.

4. Data and Discussion

In Section 3, we have observed functions of ellipsis suggested by the previous research. In addition to those, this study proposes that the ellipsis also has another function in discourse. The study itself has attempted to show whether the ellipsis has a function of emphasis in discourse, by conducting a research. We hypothesized that emphasis could be seen among four types of discourse patterns when the ellipsis occurs; specifically, 1) giving a list of phrases, 2) suspiciously repeating what the previous speaker said in the interrogative sentence, 3) providing new information (Ricento, 1987: 771) and 4) responding to questions.

In this section, experiments were conducted using five series of scripts from an American TV program in the 80s called *Families Ties* and a children's story book with a CD called *Peter Pan*. These two materials belong to different categories in terms of a genre, times and areas. Therefore, it cannot be denied that there is lack of unity between these materials. Moreover, when retrieving implicit words in the discourse, words were retrieved based on immediate situation (McCarthy & Carter, 1995: 146) judged by one researcher, which might make the judgement of the analysis subjective. Considering all those facts, this research has a certain limitation. Nevertheless, this research considers that it is still worth examining the function of ellipsis in pieces of discourse not only for adults but also those for children.

The following are some of the example sentences retrieved from the experiments. We would like to see whether elliptical sentences below have a function of emphasis in the specific discourse patterns. Examples (8) to (12) are the patterns of “giving a list of phrases”. It can be observed that the same types of phrases were spoken repeatedly, giving an emphasis on the discourse when the ellipsis occurs.

(8) What is it now Mal? *Clashing outfit? Sweater out of style? Headband too tight?*
(Family Ties, D is For Date, Episode 117)

(9) How would you rate that? *Great? Incredible? Unbelievably touching?*
What? (Family Ties, My Name is Alex, Episode 115)

(10) A little persuasion might be in order. Now, let me see. *Boiling in oil? Keelhauling? Marooning?*
(Peter Pan, 2008: 58)

(11) I did the things that all kids do. *Liked to color. Liked to finger-paint. Play the stock market.*
(Family Ties, My Name is Alex, Episode 115)

(12) I like to know what I know. *See it. Be able to prove it on a test.* (Ibid.)

In examples (8) to (12), when these utterances are more closely observed, it is revealed that the elliptical sentences occur in a list of phrases, following their previous respective sentences. At the same time, it seems that a list of phrases makes the structure stand out. In other words, listing two or three phrases in sentences with ellipsis has an effect on emphasis in the discourse as a whole.

Next, examples (13) to (17) are examined in order to find whether the elliptical sentences have a function of emphasis, suspiciously repeating what the previous speaker said in an interrogative sentence.

(13) A: I *don't* notice *any difference*.
B: *No difference?* (Family Ties, Speed Trap, Episode 28)

(14) A: Alex, you've been taking them all week and you've been acting very *weird*.
B: *Weird? Weird?* (Ibid.)

(15) A: Nick, you might have to go to *jail*.
B: What? *Jail?* (Family Ties, D is For Date, Episode 117)

(16) A: I came to listen to *the stories*.
B: *My stories?* (Peter Pan, 2008: 30)

(17) A: Because I have to *grow up* tomorrow.

B: *Grow up*?

(Ibid.)

In examples (13) to (17), it is observed that the utterance in part B of each sentence is suspiciously repeated in response to what the previous speaker said in an interrogative sentence. That is, it is expected that repeating what the previous speaker said in the elliptical sentence, leads listeners to concentrate on the only focal point. Therefore, it can be said that this type also has a function of emphasis in the discourse.

Moreover, the following examples, from (18) to (21), are shown in order to demonstrate that the elliptical sentences below have a function of emphasis, providing new information.

(18) A: Alex! *Glad* you could make it down to the final thirty seconds of dinner.

(Family Ties, Speed Trap, Episode 28)

(19) A: Do you mind? *Were trying* to study.

B: Oh sorry.

(Family Ties, D is For Date, Episode 117)

(20) A: Are you kidding me? Dad, people loved that.

B: Maybe so, but I thought you could have stopped there. *No need* to get into projected earnings.

(Family Ties, My Name is Alex, Episode 115)

(21) A: Over there, Tink, in its den. Is it there? *Must be* here somewhere.

(Peter Pan, 2008: 28)

In examples (18) to (21), it is observed that in the second utterance of each, elliptical sentences provide new information with a function of emphasis. In other words, the elimination of the subject makes what speakers really want to say more emphasized. That way, listeners are forced to concentrate on the beginning of the elliptical sentence, that is, what the speaker wants to emphasize. For example, in (19), the phrase *Were trying* in the elliptical sentence is emphasized, as if the speaker is trying to express his or her feeling that “I was trying and I want to study now, so please don’t disturb me.”

Lastly, we would like to see whether the sentences below have a function of emphasis. The following examples from (22) to (25), show types of “responding to previous questions”.

(22) A: Are you feeling all right?

B: *Never* better.

(Family Ties, Speed Trap, Episode 28)

(23) A: Is “The Miracle of Life” on yet?

B: *Just* started.

(Ibid.)

(24) A: How do I look?

B: *Great*, go!

(Ibid.)

(25) A: Hey, Jen, what's new in the annoying little world of teen love?

B: *Nothing* good.

(Family Ties, D is For Date, Episode 117)

In examples (22) to (25), the utterance in part B of each one offers a response to the previous question. All of the elliptical sentences from (22) to (25) start with adjectives or adverbs, and are emotional expressions with a nuance of the emphasis, for example, “never”, “just”, “great” and “nothing.” In such a way, a function of emphasis is more generated in the elliptical sentences, responding to previous questions.

In conclusion, the data suggest that the elliptical sentences have a function of emphasis in the specific discourse patterns such as giving a list of phrases, suspiciously repeating what the previous speaker said in an interrogative sentence, providing new information and responding to previous questions.

5. Conclusion

It seems reasonable to conclude that the ellipsis in English has a function of emphasis in the specific discourse patterns. That function of emphasis could be observed by analyzing the expressions of: 1) giving a list of phrases, 2) suspiciously repeating what the previous speaker said in an interrogative sentence, 3) providing new information, and 4) responding to previous questions. That tendency is observed not only in the utterances among the adult speakers in the TV program but also in the conversations among children in the children's story *Peter Pan*.

Therefore, as a function of subject ellipsis, “emphasis” should be added to the following functions such as supplying of an affirmative or negative response, elaboration or commentary on a proximal utterance, echoic responses and softening the implicatures by creating an indirect request/suggestion.

Notes

- 1 The theory of “the law of least effort” (Zipf, 1949) was originally laid out in the following way. People try to make an effort to minimize the labor when they do something (Zipf, 1949). Moreover, Martinet (1962: 139) refers to “least effort” in “the principle of least effort”: according to that principle, least effort “makes him restrict his output of energy, both mental and physical, to the minimum compatible with achieving his ends”. Thus, referring to the “law of least effort” (Zipf, 1949), Thomas (1979) argues that ellipsis is related to the phenomenon of the economic efficiency of the language.
- 2 Ricento (1987: 771) also notes that one of the functions of elliptical clauses is to give new information, however, he fails to give ample examples about it. Therefore, this study has made another attempt by collecting data and analyzing its effects.

References

- Halliday, K. & Ruqaiya, H. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.
- Mackenzie, J. L. (1998). The basis of syntax in the holophrase. In Michael H. and A. Martinet, André (1962). *A Functional View of Language*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- McCarthy, M. J., & Carter, R. A. (1995). Grammar and the spoken language. *Applied Linguistics*, 16 (2), 141-158.
- Nariyama, S. (2004). Subject ellipsis in English. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 36, 237-264.
- Nariyama, S. (2006). Pragmatic information extraction from subject ellipsis in informal English, *Proceedings of the Third Workshop on Scalable Natural Language Understanding*, 1-8.
- Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A Comprehensive grammar of the English language*. London: Longman.
- Ricento, T. (1987). Clausal ellipsis in multi-party conversation in English. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 11, 751-775.
- Zipf, G. K. (1949). *Human behavior and the principle of least effort*. Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley Press.

DVDs and CDs

- Family ties. (1983). Speed Trap (Episode 28). Retrieved July 26, 2013, from <http://hem.passagen.se/danielho/FamilyTies/transcripts-speedtrap.htm>.
- Family ties. (1987). My name is Alex (Episode 115), D is For Date (Episode 117). Retrieved July 26, 2013, from <http://hem.passagen.se/danielho/FamilyTies/transcripts-speedtrap.htm>.
- Peter pan. (2008). Meisaku Anime de Eikaiwa (English Conversation by Famous Stories) with CD. Tokyo: Cosmic Publishing.