Pathological Questions, Focus, and Unacceptable Ellipsis

Itai Bassi

(Leibniz-zas, Berlin; the Hebrew University, Jerusalem)

Bassi@leibniz-zas.de

SALT 34, University of Rochester

29/05/2024

Introduction

- **Question**: What is the role of focus and contrast in licensing Ellipsis?

Introduction

- Since at least Rooth (1992) and Tancredi (1992), it has been observed that ellipsis licensing is tightly connected to focus
- Recent proposal by Stockwell 2022: Reference to the concept of **Contrast** in crucial for (VP) ellipsis licensing.

(1)   *If John is wrong, then he is ~~wrong~~.   (Stockwell 2022)

Introduction

Point of this talk:

- Contrast does not play a role in the theory of ellipsis (*pace* Stockwell)
- More generally, considerations pertaining to the focus structures of a sentence do not directly enter the licensing condition on ellipsis *per se*
- Ellipsis requires mere semantic/LF identity
- The focus structure of a sentence indicates the (implicit) Question that the sentence is addressing (Roberts 1996; Katzir 2024)
- Stockwell's sentences are explained as cases which violate constraints on the kinds of questions that may be accommodated in discourse.

Semantic/LF identity condition

(2) SEMANTIC/LF IDENTITY CONDITION ON VP ELLIPSIS:

a VP may delete under semantic/LF identity with an antecedent VP in the surrounding discourse.

(3) Mary [$_{\text{VP}}$ smokes].
ANNA does [$_{\text{VP}}$ △], too.

(Keenan 1971; Sag 1976; Williams 1977; Fiengo and May 1994, a.o.)

Focus Parallelism condition

(4) FOCUS PARALLELISM CONDITION ON VP ELLIPSIS:

VP_E may delete if it is embedded in some constituent, S, such that

a. $[\![\mathbf{A}]\!] \in [\![\mathbf{S}]\!]_f$, where A is an sentence in the surrounding discourse containing a VP_A.

b. ...and VP_E is LF-identical to the VP_A (modulo indexical differences, but see Charlow 2019)

(Rooth 1992; Tancredi 1992; Heim 1997; Takahashi and Fox 2005; Merchant 2019, a.o.)

(5) a. $\underbrace{\text{Mary smokes.}}_{A}$ $\underbrace{\text{Anna}_F \text{ smokes, too.}}_{S}$

b. $[\![\mathbf{Mary\ smokes}]\!] \in [\![\mathbf{Anna}_F\ \mathbf{smokes}]\!]_f$

Stockwell 2022's Observation

- Tautologous Conditionals (Stockwell 2022):

(6)   If John is wrong, then he is wrong. (what are you gonna do?)

(7)   *If John is wrong, then he is ~~wrong~~. (what are you gonna do?)

Contrast

- Stockwell's proposal:

(8)   FOCUS PARALLELISM+~~CONTRAST~~ CONDITION ON ELLIPSIS:

   VP_E may delete if it is embedded in some constituent, S, such that

   a. $[\![A]\!] \in [\![S]\!]_f$, **and**   (Focus Parallelism, as before)

   b. $[\![\mathbf{A}]\!] \neq [\![\mathbf{S}]\!]$ **(Contrast)**

   (where A is an antecedent in the surrounding discourse.)

(7)   *If [John is wrong] , then [he is ~~wrong~~].   (Contrast isn't satisfied)
            $\underbrace{\hspace{3cm}}_{A}$ $\underbrace{\hspace{2cm}}_{S}$

(Apparently) not about semantic triviality

(9)   Either John is wrong or he ISN'T ~~wrong~~.

(10)   He is wrong and he ISN'T ~~wrong~~.

- The dis/conjuncts contrast with one another in polarity, hence (according to Stockwell 2022) ellipsis is licensed.

Challenge 1: Agreement discourses

(11) A- John is wrong.
B- Yes, he IS ~~wrong~~.

- The B sentence doesn't contrast with any overt material
- Could we nonetheless say that the negative proposition *John is not wrong* is the salient target for contrast? Maybe, but:
    - It's not clear how its salience can be motivated (see also Goodhue 2022)
    - It's not clear what blocks it from being just as salient in the unacceptable conditional from before

Challenge 2: unreasonable domain for contrast

(12) Dina expected Ram$_i$ to go to work. (Maybe) he$_i$ DID [$_{\mathrm{VP}}$ △].

$$△ = \textit{go to work}$$

- The Contrast hypothesis requires us to say that the whole first sentence is formally a focus alternative of the whole second sentence.
    - But this violates the complexity constraint on formal alternatives (Katzir 2007);
    - It also wrongly predicts that the first sentence can be used as an alternative to derive an implicature based on utterance of the second:

(13) A- Did Dina expect Ram to go to work?
      B- #/??He maybe did.
      $\not\leadsto$ ¬ *Dina expected Ram to go to work*

Proposal: the gist

- There is no Contrast requirement on ellipsis; ellipsis requires mere (LF)-identity at the VP level
- The unacceptable tautologous conditionals have a 'bad' focus structure
- Specifically, they are congruent to a 'bad' (implicit) question
  - Namely, a question that fails to satisfy basic pragmatic conditions on questions such as defining a proper partition.

A broader pattern: deaccenting instead of ellipsis

(14)   #If John is wrong, then he IS *wrong*.   (deaccenting the VP)

- (14) suggests that the problem underlying the infelicity of (7) (the elided version) is not with ellipsis *per se* but is rather a broader issue with the focus structure of these sentences.

F-to-Q mapping

(15) FOCUS TO QUESTION HYPOTHESIS:
      Any (declarative) sentence S uttered in discourse is either explicitly
      or implicitly an answer to some question Q, such that $Q \subseteq \llbracket S \rrbracket_f$.
      If Q isn't explicitly posed, a hearer of S must accommodate one.

      (Roberts 1996, Büring 2019, Beaver and Clark 2008, Katzir 2024, a.o.)

- On the assumption that all questions are non-singleton sets of
  propositions, (15) entails that every (declarative) sentence contains
  Focus marking (even in all-new contexts, in which case the whole
  sentence is F-marked)

Felicity constraint on F-marking

(16) Felicity constraint on (accommodated) questions:
S is only felicitous if the suitably chosen $Q \subseteq [\![S]\!]_f$ is a **Good Question** given the context. (Katzir 2024)

Good and Bad Questions

- A Question accommodated by an utterance of S is **not** good in a given context if (among other reasons):
    - it is surprising or too unnatural in the context
    - It cannot be presumed to be of interest to the hearer of S
    - it cannot form a proper partition of the context set (Groenendijk and Stokhof 1984)
- The plausibility of the necessary accommodation will affect the felicity of the sentence

A Pathological Question

(7)/(14) *If John is wrong, then he IS ~~wrong~~ / *wrong.*

(deleted/deaccented VP)

(17) a. <u>LF of (7)/(14)</u>: If John is wrong, then [$_{\mathrm{PolP}}$ he **IS**$_F$ wrong]

Focus on the Polarity head triggers two alternatives: positive ($\lambda p.\ p$) and negative ($\lambda p.\ \neg p$); see e.g. Goodhue 2022 and references therein

b. $[\![(17a)]\!]_f = \{$*If John is wrong he is wrong*;
                          If John is wrong he is not wrong$\}$

c. $Q = (17)b = $ **#If John is wrong, is he wrong (or not)?**

- This follows Bassi & Trinh's (paper in progress) arguments that 'conditional questions' denote questions about conditional statements, like in (17b)

A Pathological Question

(17)   a.   *If John is wrong, then [$_{\text{PoLP}}$ he **IS**$_F$ wrong]

      b. $[\![(17)]\!]_f = \{$*If John is wrong he is wrong*; *If he is wrong he is not wrong*$\}$

- (17) consists **only of semantically trivial propositions**
  $\Rightarrow$ a **Pathological Question**
- Formally, such questions cannot ever form a proper, non-singleton partition of any context set (cf. Fox 2019)
- It can therefore never be accommodated as a Good Question, per (16)

#Pathological Questions

- Pathological questions sound odd:

(18)   #If John is wrong, is he wrong (or not)?

(19)   #Is it raining or not raining$^\uparrow$?   (*Polar Q intonation*)

- See the appendix for why some speakers don't find explicit pathological Qs as bad as the cases discussed earlier

A non-pathological question

(6)   If John is wrong, then he is wrong!   (non-deaccented)

(20) a.   LF of (6): If John is wrong, then **[he is wrong]**$_F$

      b. $[\![(20)]\!]_f = \{$*If John is wrong then the party is in a different place*; *If John is wrong then it is raining*; if John is wrong then your theory was correct; ...$\}$

      c. $Q \subseteq (20)b = $ **If John is wrong, then what (relevant thing happens)?**

  - F-marking as indicated in (20) is compatible with (indeed suggested by) prosody

A non-pathological question

(20)   a.   If John is wrong, then **[he is wrong]**$_F$

   b. $[\![(20)]\!]_f = \{$*If John is wrong then the party is in a different place*; *If John is wrong then it is raining*; if John is wrong then your theory was correct; ...$\}$

- (20) consists of non-semantically trivial propositions;
- Subsets of it can easily be imagined as Good Questions in many contexts.

Free relatives

(21) a. John eats what(ever) he eats.

b. * John eats what(ever) he does ~~eat~~.   (Stockwell 2022)

- In (21a) – F-marking is on the whole object DP – Q is
  non-pathological:
  {*John eats what he eats, John eats peas, John eats chocolate...*}.

- In (21b) – F-marking is on the polarity head inside the free relative –
  Q is **pathological**
  {*John eats what he eats, John eats what he doesn't eat*}.

Intermediate Summary

- Elided/deaccented tautologous conditionals (and free relatives) like *If John is wrong, then he IS* are not good because the only possible question congruent to their focus structure is a pathological one.

(16)   FELICITY CONSTRAINT ON (ACCOMMODATED) QUESTIONS:
S is only felicitous if the suitably chosen $Q \subseteq [\![S]\!]_f$ is a **Good Question** given the context.   (Katzir 2024)

(2)   LF IDENTITY CONDITION ON VP ELLIPSIS:
a VP may delete under semantic/LF identity with an antecedent VP in the surrounding discourse. (no Contrast condition)

What are trivial assertions good for?

(6)   If John is wrong, then he is wrong. (what are you gonna do?)

- How come trivial sentences like (6) are successfully assertable?
  - Del Pinal 2019: such sentences are trivial only on the surface; at LF, they are formally non-trivial, decorated with RESCALE operators.
  - Snider 2015: these sentences are formally trivial (cf. Gajewski 2002), but they trigger a non-trivial implication of 'uncontrollability' in the pragmatics. For (6), the uncontrollability implication is that whether John is wrong or not is out of the speaker's hands.
  - I believe that for the present example, Snider's view is more appropriate, as the part in parenthesis suggests; the sentence denotes semantic triviality, and conveys a non-trivial pragmatic implication
  - But while the trivial nature of the assertion isn't sufficient to make the sentence unacceptable, the perspective offered here is that the sentence may become unacceptable depending on the indicated focus structure: if it is congruent to a pathological Q, unacceptability ensues.

Simple agreement discourses

(11) A- John is wrong.
      B- Yes, he IS ~~wrong~~.

- The ellipsis condition is met: there is semantic/LF identity
- The Focus condition (the felicity constraint on accommodating questions) is met because both A and B are answering the same implicit Q = **Is John wrong?**

Unreasonable domain for contrast

(12)   Dina expected Ram$_i$ to go to work, and (maybe) he$_i$ DID [$_{\text{VP}}$ △].

$$\triangle = \textit{go to work}$$

- On the current question-based view:
    - The identity condition on ellipsis is met
    - And the felicity constraint on accommodated questions is met:

    (22)   (Maybe$_F$) [$_{\text{PoLP}}$ he did$_F$ go to work]
             Q = *did Ram go to work?*

Unreasonable domain for contrast

(12)   Dina expected Ram to go to work, and (maybe) he DID [$_{\text{VP}}$ △].

$$\triangle = \textit{go to work}$$

- Recall that the problem under the Contrast view is that it necessitated making the problematic assumption that there be formal contrast between the clauses.

- How reasonable is it to assume (23)?

(23) $\underbrace{\text{Dina expected Ram to go to work}}_{A}$? ∈

$\underbrace{\text{maybe}_F \text{ he } [_{\text{POL}} \text{ did}_F] \text{ go to work}}_{S}$

Amelioration by preceded polar question

(24)   A- Is John wrong?
       B- If he is wrong, then he is { ~~wrong~~/*wrong* }.

(Stockwell 2022, for the ellipsis version)

Proposal for amelioration: shifted question

- Proposal: the explicit mention of the polar question by A licenses a slightly different focus structure for B's response, consistent with the prosody but crucially congruent to a non-pathological question:

(25) a.   A- Is John wrong?
      B- If [John is wrong]$_F$ then [$_{\text{POLP}}$ he IS$_F$ wrong]

   b. $Q \subseteq (25) =$ **Under what condition(s) is John wrong, and under what conditions is he not wrong?**

Proposal for amelioration: shifted question

(25) a.   A- Is John wrong?
            B- If [John is wrong]$_F$ then [$_{\text{PolP}}$ he IS$_F$ wrong]

      b. $Q \subseteq (25) =$ **Under what condition(s) is John wrong, and under what conditions is he not wrong?**

- (25)b is a sub-question of the simple polar question posed by A.
- It is licensed because it is plausible for B to assume that A would be interested in accommodating this sub-question, in lieu of getting an answer to A's question.
  - Again it does not matter that B's *assertion* is trivial, as long as it indicates a non-trivial question
- By contrast, in out-of-the-blue contexts it is difficult to imagine why someone would be interested in reconstructing the question in (25)b. Therefore, it isn't a good question out of the blue.

1 Background on Ellipsis, Focus and Contrast

2 Challenges for a Contrast condition on Ellipsis

3 Proposal
- Focus-Question mappings and 'Pathological' Questions
- Challenges overcome
- Amelioration effects
- Tautologous disjunction

4 Conclusion

Tautologous disjunction

(9)   Either John is wrong or he ISN'T { ~~wrong~~/*wrong* }.

- Why is ellipsis/deaccenting licensed here?
- Can we show that the (most plausible) underlying question is non-pathological?

Tautologous disjunction

(9)   Either John is wrong or he ISN'T { ~~wrong~~/*wrong* }.

- Intuition: This sentence answers the implicit polar question *Is John wrong?*, albeit trivially (but again with a non-trivial implication of 'uncontrollability', Snider 2015)
- This raises the question: what is the focus structure of (9), and how does it map to this underlying question in a principled way?

Tautologous disjunction

- A simple and general fact about disjuctive answers to questions:

(26) **Observation**: Question-answer discourses in which the answer is a
disjunction of the form $[A_{[...F...]}$ or $B_{[...F...]}]$ are only felicitous if
$Q \subseteq [\![A]\!]_f$ and $Q \subseteq [\![B]\!]_f$.

(27) What color convertible did he drive?
    a.   He either drove a BLUE convertible or a RED convertible.
    b. #He either drove a blue CONVERTIBLE or a RED convertible
    c. #He either drove a BLUE convertible or a red CONVERTIBLE

- I propose to incorporate this observation into the theory of
Focus-to-Question mapping even in the case of accommodated
questions, as follows:

Tautologous disjunction

(28) A disjunctive sentence $S = [A_{[...F...]}$ or $B_{[...F...]}]$, where the two F-marks are free foci, is felicitous only if the hearer can accommodate a good Question in the context, such that $Q \subseteq [\![A]\!]_f$ and $Q \subseteq [\![B]\!]_f$.

(9) Either John is wrong or he ISN'T { ~~wrong~~/*wrong* }.

(29) a. Either $\underbrace{[\text{John is wrong}]_F}_{A}$ or $\underbrace{[\text{he is NOT}_F \text{ wrong}]}_{B}$

b. $Q = \textbf{\textit{Is John wrong}} = \{\text{John is wrong, John is right}\}$
   $\subseteq [\![A]\!]_f, \ [\![B]\!]_f$

Tautologous disjunction

(9)   Either John is wrong or he ISN'T { ~~wrong~~/*wrong* }.

- As before, the theory allows for trivial assertions, just not as answers to pathological questions. But what is the point of this assertion?
- One prominent purpose is to convey complete ignorance with respect to the polar question *Is John wrong?*.
- A question can be answered with sentences denoting partial answers to the question
    - Formally: a partial answer to Q identifies a union of cells in the partition defined by Q
- Assertion (9) does this in the most extreme way, by indicating complete ignorance (formally, denoting the whole partitioned context)
    - In this sense, it functions in a similar way to a '*I don't know*' answer, another way to indicate complete ignorance.

Conclusion

- Stockwell (2022) discovered a curious pattern that seemingly points to a crucial role of Contrast in the theory of (VP) ellipsis licensing
- I hope to have shown that a more careful examination of the facts leads to the conclusion that Contrast does not after all play a role in the theory of ellipsis *per se*;
- Independent properties of focus structures and considerations of semantic triviality (Pathological Questions) conspire to explain the observations.
- We should tease apart general pragmatic conditions on focus placement and discourse coherence from the (narrower) licensing conditions on ellipsis, which make reference to the more local level of the elided VP.

The resulting picture

(16) FELICITY CONSTRAINT ON (ACCOMMODATED) QUESTIONS:
S is only felicitous if the suitably chosen $Q \subseteq [\![S]\!]_f$ is a Good
(accommodated) Question given the context.   (Katzir 2024)

- a Pathological question, like the one that's congruent to Stockwell's conditional, is
  (very) surprising and thus is not a good accommodated question

(2) SEMANTIC/LF IDENTITY CONDITION ON VP ELLIPSIS:
a VP may delete under semantic/LF identity with an antecedent VP
in the surrounding discourse.

THANK YOU!

Any (non-pathological) questions?

Acknowledgments

References I

Beaver, D. I. and Clark, B. (2008). Sense and Sensitivity: How Focus Determines Meaning. Wiley-Blackwell.

Büring, D. (2019). Focus, questions and givenness. In Questions in discourse, pages 6–44. Brill.

Charlow, S. (2019). The scope of alternatives: indefiniteness and islands. Linguistics and Philosophy.

Del Pinal, G. (2019). The logicality of language: A new take on triviality,"ungrammaticality", and logical form. Noûs, 53(4):785–818.

Fiengo, R. and May, R. (1994). Indices and identity. MIT press.

Fox, D. (2019). Partition by exhaustification: Comments on dayal 1996.

Gajewski, J. (2002). L-analyticity and natural language. Manuscript, MIT, 3.

Goodhue, D. (2022). All focus is contrastive: On polarity (verum) focus, answer focus, contrastive focus and givenness. Journal of Semantics, 39(1):117–158.

Heim, I. (1992). Presupposition projection and the semantics of attitude verbs. Journal of Semantics, 9:183–221.

References II

Heim, I. (1997). Predicates or formulas? evidence from ellipsis. In Semantics and linguistic theory, volume 7, pages 197–221.

Katzir, R. (2007). Structurally-defined alternatives. Linguistics and Philosophy, 30(6):669–690.

Katzir, R. (2024). On the roles of anaphoricity and questions in free focus. Natural Language Semantics, pages 1–28.

Keenan, E. L. (1971). Names, quantifiers, and the sloppy identity problem. Research on Language & Social Interaction, 4(2):211–232.

Merchant, J. (2019). Ellipsis: A survey of analytical approaches. The Oxford handbook of ellipsis, pages 18–46.

Roberts, C. (1996). Information Structure: Towards an integrated theory of formal pragmatics. OSU Working Papers in Linguistics, Ohio State University.

Rooth, M. (1992). Ellipsis redundancy and reduction redundancy. In Proceedings of the Stuttgart ellipsis workshop, volume 29. Citeseer.

Sag, I. A. (1976). Deletion and logical form. PhD thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

References III

Snider, T. (2015). Using tautologies and contradictions. In Proceedings of sinn und bedeutung, volume 19, pages 610–627.

Stockwell, R. (2022). Contrast and verb phrase ellipsis: The case of tautologous conditionals. Natural Language Semantics, 30(1):77–100.

Takahashi, S. and Fox, D. (2005). Maxelide and the re-binding problem. In Proceedings of SALT, volume 15, pages 223–240.

Tancredi, C. (1992). Deletion, Deaccenting and Presupposition: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Ph. D. PhD thesis, dissertation.

Williams, E. S. (1977). Discourse and logical form. Linguistic inquiry, pages 101–139.

Appendix: Accommodating vs. explicitly asking a pathological Q

- For some speakers, explicitly asking a pathological Q is less crushingly bad than asserting the declarative with a congruent focus structure to a pathological Q:

(30)   ??If John is wrong, is he wrong (or not)?

(31)   #If John is wrong, then [$_{\text{POLP}}$ he **IS**$_F$ wrong]

- Despite their trivial nature, one can imagine contexts in which these questions can be uttered, in a way similar to how non-L-analytic trivialities are acceptable (Gajewski 2002; Del Pinal 2019, a.o.)

Appendix (continued)

"Assumptions to be accommodated are supposed to be uncontroversial and unsurprising. One may explicitly assert controversial and surprising things.. but to expect one's audience to accept them by way of accommodation is not good conversational practice."

(Heim 1992)

Appendix (continued)

- Heim's view about the difference between accommodated vs. asserted **propositions** can be extended to the difference between accommodated vs. explicitly asked **questions**: one may explicitly ask controversial and surprising things, or question accepted truths, but it is an illegitimate move to expect the hearer to simply accommodate such questions

- I propose that by explicitly posing a seemingly trivial/pathological question, a speaker is indicating that they are assuming (or pretending to assume) a context set in which the question is not pathological after all.