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THE OPTION TO ELIDE: VERBAL COMPLEMENT ELLIPSIS IN DIALOGUE

1. INTRODUCTION

Ellipsis is, in general, an optional phenomenon: the speaker has the option of producing either the full version of the utterance, or the elliptic one. This raises the question of what motivates the speaker's choice of one option over the other. This paper proposes to examine this question in the case of dialogic interaction for *verbal complement ellipsis* (that is, the ellipsis of a clausal complement¹, hereafter VCE) in Romanian. While prior work has approached this question in terms of linguistic economy, this paper will examine how ellipses of this type fit into the structure of dialogic interaction, and whether the choice of eliding or not eliding an elidable complement conveys meaning.

This paper adopts Du Bois' *stance triangle*² as an analytical framework for examining the role of ellipsis in dialogic interaction. We will also refer to Rooth's³ alternative semantics analysis of focus when considering the semantic effects of (not) eliding a clausal complement. The data is drawn from two corpora of oral interaction in contemporary Romanian, IVLR and ROVA. The data shows that using a licenser while eliding a clausal complement can constitute a means of aligning one's stance to that of the previous speaker. The data further suggests that *not* eliding an elidable complement is associated with the introduction in the conversation of an alternative to the object of the interaction.

2. VERBAL COMPLEMENT ELLIPSIS

Verbal complement ellipsis (VCE) is the ellipsis of a clausal complement, licensed by a verb or verbal construction. In the examples that follow the licenser is **bold**, the site of the ellipsis is marked [✓], and the antecedent (i.e. the syntactic phrase serves as a referential source for recovering the omitted material) is underlined.

¹ This type of ellipsis also appears in the literature as NCA or VP-ellipsis, depending on the licenser that is used.

² Du Bois, John W., "The Stance Triangle", in: Englebretson, Robert (ed.), *Stancetaking in Discourse. Subjectivity, Evaluation, Interaction*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 2007, pp. 139–182.

³ Rooth, Mats, "A Theory of Focus Interpretation", *Natural Language Semantics* 1: 75–116.

- (1) Ion s-a dus la dentist, dar Maria nu **vrea** [✓].
‘Ion went to the dentist, but Maria doesn’t **want to** [✓].’
- (2) Ion nu a auzit că a nins la munte, dar Maria **știe** [✓].
‘Ion hasn’t heard that it snowed in the mountains, but Maria **knows** [✓].’
- (3) Eu ador să călătoresc cu trenul, dar soției mele nu-i **place** [✓].
‘I love to travel by train, but my wife doesn’t **like to** [✓].’

The subject is included as a “privileged” elidable complement (as in example (3), where the impersonal verb *a plăcea* ‘to be pleasing to’ licenses the ellipsis of a clausal subject). Since Romanian is a pro-drop language, it should be noted that only situations where the omitted subject refers to a clause will be considered VCEs.

Semantically, what is characteristic of the licensors of VCE is that they furnish a modal (volitive in example (1), epistemic in example (2), appreciative in example (3)) or aspectual load to the elidable complement. Consequently, VCE can be seen as an incomplete predication with specific characteristics. It is a situation where the elements that furnish a syntactic phrase with the trait of predicativity are present (in the form of the licenser), but the syntactic phrase itself that acquires this trait is missing⁴.

3. PRIOR WORK

The frequency with which VCE occurs in verbal interaction is dependent on the communicative situation. In a previous study⁵, the distribution of VCE was examined in ROVA and IVLR depending on the communicative situation in which it occurs. The communicative situation was characterized based on three parameters⁶: dialogic vs. monologic communication, direct vs. mediated communication (e.g., by telephone or television), and free vs. controlled communication (controlled communication involving an inequality between interlocutors in terms of rights and obligations in the communicative process, such as the right to take the floor). Data from these two corpora showed that VCE is approximately twice as frequent in dialogic communication as in monologic communication, approximately twice as frequent in direct communication as in mediated communication, and approximately twice as frequent in free communication as in controlled communication, with frequency calculated as the number of ellipses relative to the number of words in a transcription. These findings

⁴ Hartular, Șerban, „Contribuții bazate pe corpus la analiza elipsei”. Teză de doctorat, Facultatea de Litere, Universitatea din București, 2024, pp. 93–94.

⁵ Hartular, Șerban, „Efectul situației de comunicare în distribuția elipsei verbale în limba română vorbită”, în (eds.) Chelaru-Murăruș, Oana, Mihaela-Viorica Constantinescu, Claudia Ene, Gabriela Stoica, Andra Vasilescu, *Limbă, societate, cultură. In onorem Liliana Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu și Mihaela Mancaș*, București, 2021 vol. 1, pp. 179–189.

⁶ ILVR, pp. 16–17.

are consistent with an observation made on other corpora⁷ that VCE is more frequent in spoken communication than in written communication, given that written communication is by its nature monologic and mediated.

The above study also noted that the communicative situations where VCE is more frequent are precisely those that facilitate the speaker's detection and correction of potentially faulty communication that may be poorly understood by the interlocutor: detecting faulty communication is facilitated by dialogue, in which interlocutors can express their reactions to an utterance, and by direct communication, in which the speaker has access to the interlocutors' nonverbal reactions; correcting faulty communication is easier when communication is free and the speaker can take the floor again at any time.

Based on these observations, the aforementioned study proposed the hypothesis that the speaker perceives VCE as a less reliable means of communication than the non-elliptical version of the same utterance and, consequently, uses elliptical utterances more frequently in communicative contexts where potential misunderstandings can be corrected than in contexts that inhibit perceiving the interlocutor's reaction and revision of a previous statement. In this analysis, the driving force behind ellipsis is linguistic economy – the desire to expend as little effort as possible in communicating an idea – while the factor limiting its use is the speaker's desire to ensure that the message is correctly understood by the interlocutor.

The analysis that follows does not contradict or preclude this explanation. Rather, it seeks to discern the functional considerations that motivate the speaker's choice between an elliptic statement and its non-elliptic counterpart, specifically within the realm of dialogic interaction.

4. THE STANCE TRIANGLE

To analyze the behavior of VCE in dialogic interaction, we will refer to the *stance triangle*⁸. The *stance triangle* models stance, seen as the basic building block of dialogic interaction, as a triune act involving two subjects (the participants) and an object of the interaction. The first subject introduces the object of the interaction and evaluates it, epistemically or affectively, thereby positioning him/herself in relation to the object. The second subject *reacts* to the first subject's positioning by evaluating the object and positioning him/herself in turn relative to the object. This reaction results in an alignment of the two stances (which may consist of agreement, disagreement, or a more nuanced alignment). The action of the first subject is a *stance lead*, that of the second subject a *stance follow*⁹.

⁷ Hartular, Șerban, „Contribuții bazate pe corpus la analiza elipsei”. Teză de doctorat, Facultatea de Litere, Universitatea din București, 2024, pp. 32–33.

⁸ Du Bois, *op. cit.*

⁹ Idem, p. 161.

Du Bois points out that it is pragmatically obligatory for the second subject's evaluation to be a reaction to that of the first subject. For instance:

- A: I don't like those.
 B: #I don't. / I don't *either*.

The version of the second statement that contains an *either* is perfectly natural, while the one where *either* is missing is "pragmatically aberrant"¹⁰, even if grammatically it raises no issues. The obligatory reactive nature of the *stance follow* is what leads to the alignment of the two subjects' positions.

An examination of those situations in oral corpora where an interlocutor replies to a previous statement by using a VCE shows that the semantic structure of a VCE maps very well to the pragmatic structure described by the stance triangle. The object of the interaction, introduced and evaluated as part of the *stance lead*, serves as the antecedent. The second subject reacts to this evaluation by using a VCE, where the modal load of the licenser relays the *stance follow*, i.e. his/her own evaluation of the object. The elided complement, which refers to the object of the interaction, can be omitted because what is necessary to the interaction is the *stance follow*'s reactive evaluation and, to provide this, the licenser alone suffices.

The following example shows how epistemic VCE licensers are used to follow an initial *stance lead*.

- (4) A: ...Ori ei au luat-o și-au vândut-o și-au scos banii – că nici italienii nu erau...
 B: Da, da, da.
 A: Adică...
 B: **E posibil** [√].
 A: **Mai mult ca sigur** [√]. Probabil că mașina a ieșit imediat din țară, i-au schimbat caroseria, culoarea...

 'A: ...Either they took it and sold it and took the money -- 'cause neither were the Italians...
 B: Yes, yes, yes.
 A: I mean...
 B: **It's possible** [√].
 A: **It's practically certain** [√]. The car probably left the country immediately, they changed its body, its color...'
 (ILVR:57)

In the initial statement, speaker A introduces the object/antecedent as an alternative (even if the other alternative is not specified), therefore as a potential state

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

of facts. Speaker B reacts to this implicit epistemic evaluation with a VCE, evaluating the state of facts as possible, and speaker A reacts in turn with a VCE, calling it practically certain. In this manner, the positions of the two speakers reach an alignment.

In the next example, a state of facts is evaluated appreciatively.

- (5) A: ...Că... pe treişunu ar fi chiar penibil să vii la servici.
 B: Da. Pe treişunu nu, **nu se justifică** [✓].
 A: Practic îţi strică tot... îţi strică tot cheful ştii de... petrecere, de sărbătoare.
- ‘A: ...Because... coming to the office on the 31st would be pathetic.
 B: Yes. On the 31st no, it **would be uncalled-for** [✓].
 A: Practically it ruins all... it ruins your whole mood, you know, for partying, for celebrating.’
 (IVLR:91)

Speaker A introduces the object of the interaction, namely the potential state of facts where one goes to the office on December 31st, and takes the stance lead by evaluating it affectively (as pathetic). Speaker B, in the *stance follow*, reacts with a VCE whose licenser *a (nu) se justifică* ‘to be (un)called-for’ also conveys a negative evaluation.

The next example (a conversation where a reporter is complaining because one of his stories wasn’t printed) is interesting because the ellipsis occurs before the first subject even has the chance to finish uttering the object/antecedent.

- (6) A: ...Îţi dai seama au apărut cred c-au apărut în –
 D: **Sunt sigur** [✓].
 A: – în „Unirea”. Şi-aşa... ((strigă)) Şefa!
 B: Da.
 A: De ce nu mi-o băgat evaziunea fiscală?
- ‘A: ...You realize they appeared I think they appeared in –
 D: **I’m sure** [✓].
 A: – in “Unirea”. And so... ((shouts)) Boss!
 B: Yes.
 A: Why didn’t they put in my tax evasion?’
 (ILVR:121)

Despite the fact that A’s initial utterance is not entirely well-formed syntactically and is interrupted, the interaction remains intelligible: it is clear that A is making an epistemic evaluation of an object, while the interlocutor D conveys, through their elliptical utterance, their reaction to this evaluation, aligning with it. Since the nature of the *stance lead* is made evident by the evidential and epistemic verbs *îţi dai seama*

‘you realize’ and *cred* ‘I think’, the second subject is able to react to it even before the object/antecedent is fully articulated.

The fact that VCEs are more frequent in dialogic communicative situations (and more generally in communicative situations that favor interaction) can be explained by the fact that VCEs fit into the pragmatic function of expressing a *stance follow*: the licenser’s modal load communicates the nature of the second subject’s evaluation of the object of the interaction, while the elided clausal complement, which refers to the object, can be omitted because the pragmatically relevant information in a *stance follow* is the second subject’s *reaction* to the first evaluation, not the object of the evaluation itself.

5. WHY SPEAKERS (DON’T) ELIDE

The analysis in the previous section offers a reason for using VCE in dialogue, but does not address the fact that a speaker can (and does) choose between the elliptic and the non-elliptic versions of a statement. Linguistic economy considerations would suggest that, if a speaker can choose between an elliptic and a non-elliptic version, he/she would always choose the elliptic version, to minimize speech effort. Nevertheless, the examination of the oral corpora showed that there are situations where a *stance follow* could be realized as an ellipsis, but is not.

The examination of these situations, where a VCE is possible as part of a *stance follow* but does not occur, shows that there is virtually no difference of meaning where the (non)elliptic construction itself is concerned. However, these situations differ from the situations where ellipses do occur in that the non-elliptic constructions are followed by the introduction in the conversation of an alternative to the object of the interaction. In the examples that follow, both the elidable complement and the object of the interaction (which would have served as an antecedent if the complement had been elided) are underlined. The prosodic stress, as noted in the original transcripts, is rendered in italics to allow observing whether the unelided complement is somehow marked.

- (7) B: ...((vorbește la telefon)) Bună ziua. Vă rog, cu domnu’ Alexandru Ionescu aș putea vorbi? A plecat. Da, bine, mulțumesc frumos. Bună ziua. ((către A)) Din nefericire a plecat.

A: Păi a plecat acasă bietu’ om.

B: Nu. Nu **cred** c-a plecat acasă, că zicea că ajunge pe la cinci jumate șase. O fi avut vreun biznis ceva.

‘B: ...((on the phone)) Hello. Could I speak with Mr. Alexandru Ionescu? He left. Yes, fine, thank you. Good day. ((to A)) Unfortunately, he left.

A: Well, the poor man must have gone home.

- B: *No. I **don't think** he went home, 'cause he said he'd arrive around five thirty – six o'clock. He must have some business, something.'*
(ILVR: 41-42)

In this example, speaker A offers the supposition that Mr. Ionescu went home. Speaker B evaluates this state of facts as improbable by using the negated verb *cred* 'I think, believe'. This verb can license VCE and, in fact, the elliptic version (*Nu cred* [✓], *că zicea că ajunge acasă...*) would be perfectly acceptable. However, the presence of the elidable complement coincides with the presence of an alternative to it, namely that Mr. Ionescu must have some other business to take care of.

- (8) B: *Ce-i aia „bios draiv”?*
A: *Păi,... ăsta.*
B: *Bă prietene. Ce naiba i-aicea? Bag-o floapă acolo goală.*
A: *Stai că am un disc sistem.*
B: *Nu-mi **trebuie** disc sistem, mă. Bag-o floapă goală.*

‘B: *What is a “bios drive”?*
A: *Well, this is.*
B: *Buddy. What the hell is this? Stick a blank floppy in there.*
A: *Hang on, I have got a system disk.*
B: *I don't **need** a system disk, you. Stick in a blank floppy.'*
(ILVR:94)

Speaker A introduces the fact that he has a system disk and implicitly evaluates it as useful. Speaker B reacts, using the negated verb *a îi trebui* 'to need' (a possible licenser of VCE) to indicate that, on the contrary, he does not evaluate this state of fact as being useful. Again, an elliptic version (*Nu-mi **trebuie*** [✓], *mă. Bag-o floapă goală.*) would have been acceptable in Romanian. The presence of the unelided complement coincides with the fact that speaker B immediately brings up the alternative to using the system disk, namely using a blank floppy.

- (9) A: *Când mergeam noi, trăgeam ne – trăgeam dă fiare.*
C: *Trăgeam de fiare, da...*
A: *Nu trăgeam mult. Î- da, așa, amatori cum eram noi...*
C: *Amatori, da, da... Mai râdeam...*
D: *Uite, **nu mi-ar plăcea** să mă duc să trag de fiare. Î- mă mulțumesc cu aerobicu. E minunat.*

‘A: *When we would go and lift – we would lift weights.*
C: *We would lift weights, yes.*
A: *We didn't lift a lot. Yes, like the amateurs we were...*

- C: Yes, amateurs. We would laugh around...
 D: See, I **wouldn't like** to go lift weights. I'm content with aerobics.
 It's wonderful.'
 (ROVA: 140)

Speaker D reacts to the first two speakers' fond reminiscence of lifting weights – which is the object of the interaction – by evaluating this activity negatively. However, she does not elide the complement that refers to the object of the interaction, even though an ellipsis would be possible in Romanian, with a slight modification (*Uite, mie nu mi-ar plăcea [✓]. Mă mulțumesc cu aerobicul*). However, again, the unelided complement is followed by the introduction of an alternative to the object in the conversation, namely *aerobics*.

On the other hand, in the examples in section 4, where the *stance follow* consists of elliptic statements, the ellipsis is *not* followed by an alternative to the object of the interaction. In (4), the final speaker continues by describing what else probably happened to the car. In (5), the final speaker continues by elaborating on the ill effects of going to the office on New Year's Eve. In (6), speaker A continues by asking his boss why his story wasn't printed.

One may draw a parallel between this data and Rooth's alternative semantics analysis of focus. According to this theory, the function of focus is to evoke "a set of propositions which potentially contrast with the ordinary semantic value" of the focused element¹¹, in other words, of alternatives to the focused element. In the literature, focus is generally treated as a binary trait (an element either bears focus, or it does not), and the unelided complements in the examples above do not bear any prosodic stress that would mark them out as foci. However, if one considers that there may be degrees to emphasis, an unelided complement, which is uttered, is less de-emphasized than an elided complement, which is not uttered at all. This greater emphasis appears to have the function, not of highlighting the unelided complement as being somehow important, but of indicating that an alternative to the unelided complement is relevant to the conversation. And, indeed, speakers in the examples in this section follow unelided complements with alternatives to them.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The data we examined showed that the semantic characteristics of verbal complement ellipsis render it well-suited to fulfil the pragmatic, dialogic function of a *stance follow*. The licenser, which furnishes the trait of predicativity to the elidable complement, including its modal load, expresses the attitude, the evaluation of the state of facts that the elidable complement refers to, therefore expressing the second

¹¹ Rooth, Mats, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

subject's reaction to the first speaker's position vis-a-vis the object of the interaction, and thereby leading to the alignment of the two positions. The omission of the elidable complement is possible because the *reaction* is the important, pragmatically obligatory information that the second subject must convey, not the identity of the object of the interaction.

While this analysis explains the high frequency of VCE in dialogic (as opposed to other types of) interaction, it does not explain why a speaker would choose to elide or not to elide a complement. Examining those situations in the corpora where a VCE is possible as part of a *stance follow*, yet does not occur, we found that non-elision is associated with the introduction of an alternative to the object of the interaction in the conversation. This suggests that, in uttering an elidable complement, the greater emphasis on (or lesser de-emphasizing of) that element has an effect that is akin to that of focalization, namely of indicating that an alternative to the elidable complement is relevant to the conversation at hand.

GLOSSARY

IVLR = Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu, Liliana (coord.). 2002. *Interacțiunea verbală în limba română actuală. Corpus selectiv. Schiță de tipologie*. București: Editura Universității din București.
ROVA = Dascălu Jinga, Laurenția (coord.). 2011. *Româna vorbită actuală (ROVA). Corpus și Studii*. București: Editura Academiei Române.

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(Abstract)

This paper examines the verbal complement ellipsis (i.e., the ellipsis of a clausal complement) in dialogue in Romanian and the question of what motivates a speaker's choice of eliding or not eliding a complement when either is possible. Using the framework of the *stance triangle*, analysis shows this type of ellipsis is well suited to carry out the dialogic, pragmatic function of a *stance follow*. The choice of (not) eliding appears to be driven by an association between the presence of the elidable complement and the introduction into the conversation of a semantic alternative to that complement.

Keywords: ellipsis, dialogue, stance, focus, Romanian language.

Cuvinte-cheie: elipsă, dialog, poziționare, focalizare, limba română.

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