

Proformation and Ellipsis in Cameroon Spoken English

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Preliminaries

1. Preliminaries

- Sentences are often defined as “complete thought”. So, what has not been said should naturally not be understood.
- Yet, economy and least effort are typical traits that have been listed for languages, even noted in the trajectory of linguistic change.
- The quantity maxim in communication states “reduce as much as possible”. Grice (1989)
- Therefore, while sentences must be complete, speakers also know when to leave out information and still make sense.
- This linguistic practice, which often yields grammatically defective forms, comes under the syntactic processes of ellipsis and pro-forms.

- The tendency therefore is always to leave out material that is already too obvious, typically by being already mentioned in the text or **sufficiently clear from the context**.
- This has to be done in such a way as to avoid loss of meaning, through what has been called verbatim recoverability. (Quirk et al, 1994)
- Two syntactic processes used to handle deletion and yet keep meaning are ellipsis and pro-forms. Linguistic material is understood, though not overtly expressed.
- This has a bearing on the relation between form and meaning.



BACKGROUND

Ellipsis and pro-forms defined

- “[...] as a general principle of ellipsis, we can say that ellipsis occur when something of a structural importance is left out, and when there is a sense of incompleteness associated with that omitted item.”
Vejuvic (2014:414)
- Hence, ellipsis must be grammatically defective.

What counts as ellipsis

The following conditions have been listed to define a structure as elliptical:

1. They are optional. When an obligatory ellipsis occurs, it is a null pro-form or substitution by zero as with comparative deletion, which some theorists have analysed as a null pro-form.
2. Ellipsis leaves behind other words referred to as remnants. Remnants play a vital role in structural recoverability.

3. Verbatim recoverability: Actual words have to be recovered precisely. This is very important for interpretation. These are modes of recoverability:

- Textual: from neighbouring part of text
- Situational: from extra-linguistic information; e.g., deixis, context, gestures, etc.
- Structural: from knowledge of grammatical structure

4. The non-elliptical version must be acceptable.

Why treat ellipsis and pro-forms together

- Ellipsis at times results in a pro-form or could be the true ellipsis when the space is left empty or is replaced by a zero element.
- In all, both ellipsis and pro-forms are used under the same condition: that the material left out or replaced by another word (i.e., pro-form) should be recoverable either textually or contextually.
- Halliday and Hassan (1976:145) even define ellipsis as “substitution by zero”.

Typology of Ellipsis

- Classification by kind of constituent elided (Bongsignori (2007):
 1. Ellipsis of the subject (very conversational, typical of diary entries) EX. [E] Got the tickets? [E] saw John today.
 2. Nominal ellipsis: (here a remnant of the NP - e.g. determiner, numerative, etc. - permits recoverability) Ex. A: How many boys? B: Just two [E]
 3. Verbal ellipsis: divided in two: lexical and operator
 - a. Lexical: I thought something would come up, but nothing has [E] so far.
 - b. Operator: Migrants [E] found dead on trailer. Typical of newspaper headlines.

Typology of Ellipsis (cont'd)

4. Subject + verb ellipsis: [E] suitable for vegetables. (notice on a container)
5. Clausal ellipsis: frequent in question-and-answer sequences. E.g., A: You were seen at the trade fair yesterday.
B: Yes [E], sir. [E] At midnight.
6. Ellipsis of predicate nominal: This is the ellipsis of the subject complement in a clause.
e.g. The idea is that we are Anglophones. I am [E] and you are [E].
7. Ellipsis of the object: mostly attested in the register of instructional writing.
e.g. Put water into a saucepan; add potatoes and boil [E] for 15 minutes.

Typology based on syntactic behaviour

1. **Gapping:** In coordinate structures, where redundant material in the immediate preceding clause can be gapped. A remnant appears to the left and right of the elided material.
 - John can play the guitar, and Mary [E] the violin.
2. **Stripping or bare argument ellipsis:** A kind of gapping where only one remnant occurs with elided material.
 - John can play the guitar, and Mary [E] too.
3. **Verb phrase ellipsis:** elides a non-finite VP, often introduced by an auxiliary or 'to'
 - John can play the guitar; Mary can[E] too.
 - He has done it before, which means he will [E] again.
4. **Pseudo-gapping:** mostly in comparative and contrastive contexts:
 - They have been eating the apples more than they have [E] the oranges.

5. **Answer ellipsis:** Question focuses information and answer provides missing information.

- A: Who's there? B: John [E].

6. **Sluicing:** elides everything from a question except from the question word.

- John can play something, but I don't know what [E]?
- A: Something unusual happened. B: What [E]?

7. **Nominal Ellipsis:** the noun and perhaps some accompanying modifiers is omitted. Occurs with some determinatives in English

- The first train and the second [E] have arrived.
- If you use my car, I will use my wife's [E].

8. **Comparative deletion:** In comparative clauses introduced by "than". Peculiar in ellipsis because the non-elliptical version is unacceptable.

- More people arrived than we expected [E] (would arrive).

9. **Null complement anaphora:** elides a complete complement. Elided material must be a finite clause, infinitive phrase, or prepositional phrase, but not a noun phrase.

- They asked Bill to help, but he refused [E].



DESIGN AND METHOD

The situation in New Englishes Context

Some important questions:

- Are the principles or theory of ellipsis and pro-forms universal or are there any cross-linguistic variations?
- How do individual languages use this phenomenon?
- Do pro-formation and ellipsis in CamE respect the cannons analysed for BrE?

This can be measured from the kind of constituents involved in the process and the methods of recoverability.

NB: British English at times prefer a pro-form where AmE would have ellipsis. E.g.

- BrE: I ate all the chocolate, even though I shouldn't have done.
- AmE: I ate all the chocolate, even though I shouldn't have [E].

- This already indicates that the theory of empty categories is not completely universal in its phonological form and that there is a place for cross-linguistic variation.
- It is clear that whether a linguistic structure should be elided completely or substituted for by a shorter form is clearly an issue of language conventions in a speech community.
- Context may be important in the reconstruction of the meaning of elided material. The question is what context? Is it the immediate context (as in a conversation) or some wider context only understood within the community?
- If ellipsis and proformation operate differently across languages, then they should be relevant in the New Englishes syntactic debate.

The problem

- Syntactic studies in the New Englishes have the mission of describing word order innovations in English in the new nations.
- However, most of them have either focused on innovative insertions, deletions, distortions OR on the varying uses of English words (at times lexical but mostly functional (see Sala, 2014)).
- Written English research has been the focus (as if that is all the New Nations need).
- Spoken English dynamics have been largely neglected.
- Little attention has been paid to **when**, **how** and **why** information is left out and to how it is recovered.

The Problem (cont'd)

- Pro-forms and ellipsis vary from language to language and therefore have a cultural dimension, with a bearing on conventions of language use in any speech community. Languages, therefore, do not perfectly share a common principle in the use of pro-forms and ellipsis.
- Arguably, this could also be part of the syntactic and discoursal variation from the one New English to the other.
- Therefore, we need to understand the way ellipsis and pro-forms operate in CamE to fully grasp its form, content and character.

Research questions

The following related research questions could be asked for Cameroon English (CamE):

- What distinctive forms do pro-forms and ellipsis take in spoken CamE?
- In what register are they used?
- How different, or similar, are these to those analysed for British English?
- What new roles do pro-forms and ellipsis play in CamE?

Note on data

The data for this study come from

1. Observation and recordings of conversations in Cameroon English conversations and
2. A re-analysis of our previous postulates, notably Sala (2003, 2010, 2012, 2014) and Mbangwana and Sala (2009).

What English are we describing?

What is CamE syntax?

- A CamE syntactic structure must not be BrE.
- The paradox about studies in the New Englishes is for the domain of syntax to be overtaxed.
- Researchers tend to think that “He is going where?” is stranger than CamE /matʃet/ instead of RP /məʃeɪtɪ/ for “machete”.
- We maintain the stand we took in Sala (2006) where a structure is considered CamE if it can be used for communication between two Cameroonians.

Data analyses

In the analyses, we will pay attention to

- What is elided or substituted for,
- Method of recovery of the lost or substituted information, and
- The function, if any, of such a process.

NB: The space for elided material is indicated [E].



ELLIPSIS IN CamE

Verb complement ellipsis

- A say [E] eh! (attention getter in a conversation)
- I am telling you [E]! (Way of agreeing/ consenting in conversations.
 - A: This government is really corrupt.
 - B: I am telling you [E].
- You are saying it without knowing [E]. (= what you have said is not well stressed. There is more to that than you think you have said. Used as a cooperative phrase to foreground additional information in a conversation. This information may be stated immediately afterwards or may be left unstated.
 - A: This child is very wicked.
 - B: You are saying it without knowing [E].

Answer Ellipsis

A: Come and eat, please.

B: [E] When I am not hungry?

- Here, the main clause is left out and only the adverbial clause is used.
- This has contrastive effect.
- Mode of recoverability: Textual

Verb and complement ellipsis

- This may not be the whole predicate that is elided.
 1. Give this to your mother, [**and tell her**] that she should keep it very well.
 2. She abandoned the idea and pleaded with her to take care of the kids and [**said**] that whenever they need something , she should be contacted for help.
 3. When Jesus resurrected, people were [**saying something**] like hey this is a strong man.
- Recoverability: wider context

Subject + verb ellipsis

1. You are beating that child up that [**he has done**] what? (Do verb)
 2. [**Mother says**] That you should come immediately. (Say-verb for reported speech).
 3. They mobilised themselves and refused to contribute even a franc [**the reason being**] that bygones were bygones.
- Recoverability: wider context

Verb complements in second coordinate verb

1. In fact, there was no light so the members had asked their progenitors to fetch wood in the afternoon and bring [E]so that it could be lighted.
2. Take this books and give [E] to your mother.
3. You have taken my daughter and destroyed [E] and now you are bring her back to me?
4. Since she had never eaten this type of animal before, she abandoned it in the farm [E] that it should carry its ill luck and go away with [E]. (It should go away with its ill-luck)
5. Go and look for a dictionary in daddy's room and bring [E].
 - (CamE coordinate verbs (BrE catenatives) are prone to ellipsis with transitive verbs, where the second Equi-objective NP is deleted.)
 - Recoverability: textual, verbatim

Not ellipsis: or Not-stripping in BrE

- I came to visit you and you were not [**present**].
Here the elided material is not recoverable structurally, but from some wider context. The interlocutor uses a wider context to come up with “.... present”

Cooperative Ellipsis

Consider the following conversations:

1. A: I told him that I came to collect my mo...

B: ...ney

A: And advised him not to be wic...

B: ...ked.

2.

Priest: Why should I crawl when I can walk; why should I walk when I can run; and why should I run when I can [E]

Audience: ... fly.

- With cooperative ellipsis, the information left out (usually syllables and at times full words) is recoverable using context.
- It is cooperative because the speaker gets his listener to complete the sentences he (the speaker) is constructing.
- Here, the speaker leaves out material deliberately so that his listener can complete it to show his attentiveness, understanding and sympathy with the situation or subject under discussion.
- However, this would make a serious study within the framework of conversational analyses. It suffices to state here that someone makes a statement and deliberately leaves out chunks of it (syllables and at times full words), so that his interlocutor can complete them. This establishes cooperation during the conversation, assures the speaker of the listener's attention and establishes intimacy.
- Recoverability: mostly textual and structural



Pro-forms in CamE

You people as pro-form

You people have decided not to publish the results, na, Sir.

- In what ways is the use of “you people” distinctive? How different is it from BrE “you”?
 - Only used in the plural to designate more than one person. BrE ‘you’ may select a plural verb, but CamE needs another kind of personal pronoun that distinguishes the number for second person singular and second person plural. E.g., "What have you people eaten today?"
 - Used to refer to a single person and the group he represents. Ex. "Please Sir, you people have decided not to publish results, na?" BrE would use an impersonal form.
 - This form is influenced by local languages which distinguish between second person singular and plural. e.g. CPE has 'You don kam' and "Wuna don kam?" This may be reinforced by the same distinction made by French, a parallel language in Cameroon.

Non-argument pronouns

1. I will be coming **me** and watching **my Ina** here.
2. We are going **us** away.

- Non-argument pronouns are untheta-marked pronouns.
- They surface only in the syntax and do not constitute part of the verbs argument structure.
 - It can take several positions
 - Initial : **Me** I will be coming and watching my Ina.

- Medial: I will be coming **me** and watching my Ina."
- Final : I will be coming and watching my Ina **me**.
- It is a copy of the person and number of the subject noun in the immediate clause in a complex structure.
 1. **I want that you should calm you down.**
 2. **She is eating her the food without salt.**

Like this as a pro-form

Cases of situational recoverability with the use of gesticulation:

1. You are **like this**. (showing the thumb = very cute for subject complement)
2. This boy **like this** can disappoint us, eh! (pro-adjective)
3. How can you call me in the night **like this**?
4. Hold this bag **like this**.

Recoverability: context of situation

Raw data

- Let's **make** and go. (= hurry up)
- You are **making** as if I am your wife. (= behaving)
- The **thing** has entered him. (= what I said)
 - *Onomatopoeic objects as pro-forms?*
- Something is **making wuruwuru** under the car. (= strange sound)
- If I hear any **nweng** again, I will kill you. (= the least noise)
- **This one** that you are sitting there like this, I hope there is no problem?
- **My own** is that you should pay my money.

Should these be dismissed fro the ellipsis/proformation debate?

'They' as an indefinite pronoun in CamE

1. **They** have soiled the toilet.
2. **They** have already published results.

(Used to replace passivisation, calqued from the French 'on' and from indefinite pronoun system in local languages).

Conclusion

- CamE ellipsis differs from BrE ellipsis in the following ways:
 1. There is the case of **inherent ellipsis**. This is ellipsis where the structure is grammatically defective but is not sanctioned by verbatim recovery. The recovery is bound by some wider context where verbs of ‘saying’ and **post-not subject complements** are elided.
 - a. []that you should come.
 - b. I came to visit you and you were not [E]
- This is exophoric ellipsis

2. Ellipsis and proformation are sometimes syntactic functions/operations. It could serve the purpose of reporting ([E] **that you should come**), passivisation (**They have soiled the toilet.**) and even modality ([E] **That you will not come?**)
3. Distinctive CamE pro-forms come in to fill a gap.
 1. What did **you people** eat today? (2nd person plural)
 2. She is eating **her** the food without salt. (modality: lack of choice)