

## Elliptical and discontinuous if-conditionals: Co-text, context, inference and intuitions

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### Abstract

Corpus research depends on what is 'physically there'. The classification of conditionals hinges on the semantic marking of their verb phrases, particularly time reference and modality, which is established by examining formal properties in context. Elliptical if-conditionals require the analyst to infer the elided elements. This may be straightforward if these elements are verbatim recoverable from the co-text (e.g. Quirk et al., 1985: 887), as in (1):

- (1) *What appears on the surface as a reasoned form of life is in reality a mask for a partial approach to reason, if not sheer irrationality.* [BNC, GOR 361]

However there are cases when the elided element is not co-textually recoverable, as in (2):

- (2) *I quickly stuck my head between my knees, remembering ... remembering. Sometime, someone said, don't pull the body off or the head'll stay in and go septic. Spray them with something. Alcohol? Was that it? What if it made them go deeper?* [BNC, G02 1577]

Matters are further complicated in discontinuous elliptical if-conditionals that have formal features which point towards assigning a type that contradicts intuitions, or, in other words, a layperson's interpretation, such as (3) below.

- (3) - *Thank you again. What would it involve?*  
- *Two weeks' filming early January - if this three-day week nonsense doesn't interfere.*  
[BNC, GUF 2337]

It seems questionable whether the full form of the reply in (3) would be '*It would involve two weeks' filming - if this three-day week nonsense doesn't interfere*', or whether a 'full form' should be even posited. Ellipsis presents the corpus analyst with the double challenge of "keeping intuition temporarily at bay" and avoiding imposing the features of given frameworks on the data (Sinclair, 2004: 47), particularly when co-textual clues are lacking, unhelpful or counter-intuitive. This paper will investigate the problem and report on the strategies used to address it.

Corpus Linguistics 2005, University of Birmingham, 14-17 July 2005

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## Outline

- Motivation
- Ellipsis: nature and recovery
- Straightforward cases
- Interesting cases
- Considerations

## Motivation

- Ongoing study of *if*-conditionals in the BNC.
- Classification of *if*-conditionals with special reference to modality.
- The classification of conditionals hinges on tense, aspect and modality marking.
- Elliptical *if*-conditionals comprise 13% of the written sample.
- Corpus research depends on what is 'physically there'.
- Methodological considerations pointed towards interesting patterns.

## Idiosyncrasies

- Focus only on verb ellipsis.
- Not always necessary to recover all the elided elements.
- Lexical verb recoverability need not be precise, as long as the tense/aspect marking is present/recoverable.
- Recoverability of modal expressions is stricter.

## Premises

- Ellipsis poses the double challenge of "keeping intuition temporarily at bay" and avoiding imposing the features of given frameworks on the data.

(Sinclair, 2004: 47)

- Use of theoretical assumptions and intuitions are inescapable in corpus-based linguistic analysis.  
(e.g. Hunston, 2002: 65; Sampson, 2001: 135; Stubbs, 1996: 47)
- The formal marking of 'prototypical' types of conditionals is not a dependable clue for recovering ellipsis.

## Ellipsis 1: Features

- Omission of structural elements. Elided elements may be represented by a 'counter' (e.g. *do*, *so*).
- The elided elements are understood by speakers/readers.
- The elided elements can be recovered and/or inferred on the basis of: co-text, context, grammatical knowledge, intuitions.
- The antecedent of the ellipsis can be inserted in the elliptical slot, albeit with grammatical changes.
- The reconstructed full version is grammatical and retains the meaning.

(Carlson, 2002; Halliday & Hasan, 1976: 142-145; Hankamer & Sag, 1976; Quirk et al., 1985: 82, 858-888; Sag & Hankamer, 1984)

## Ellipsis 2: Reservations

- Recognition of textual/surface ellipsis depends on the context and/or grammatical knowledge and/or intuitions.
- Recovery of ellipsis is not necessarily verbatim. Antecedents may need to be grammatically transformed, or reconstructed from meaning-based representations, as verbatim memory may not have been retained.
- Writers/speakers themselves may not have specific intended linguistic antecedents in mind.

(Carlson, 2002; Graham & Oakhill, 1989; Mauner et al., 1995; Murphy, 1985; Murphy & Shapiro, 1994; Quirk et al., 1985: 884-885)

## Recovery not essential

One commentator, while accepting the importance of Rutter's finding, then asks whether we have the means by which deliberately to create a planned organizational ethos in a school. **If we do**, does this mean that the use of coercion, enthusiasm or the encouragement to be involved are equally acceptable? [HPX 125]

- Operator carries tense marking.
- Grammar precludes aspect marking.

My husband died nearly 15 years ago and I would like to reassure you that, although the pain never goes completely, time is indeed a great healer. But you know, I think it's important to feel that pain. It's because you loved your husband so much that you feel so much. So, **if you can**, make a friend of the pain. [C8B 1400]

- Modal is present.

## Recovery ambiguous

POWER-HOUSE prop Kevin Ward yesterday appealed to Great Britain coach Mal Reilly: "Let me have one last crack at Australia." The 35-year-old St Helens pack star has declared himself available for next month's World Cup Final against the Aussies. "**If selected** it would be my swansong on the international scene and a great way to bow out," said Ward. [CH3 5959]

A SCIENTIFIC laser unit has been stolen from Telford College in Edinburgh and police have given warning the equipment could be dangerous **if mishandled**. [K5D 13207]

So how did he get the address? From someone who had met Renwick there? Someone who also had access to Renwick's private number? **If so**, decided Renwick, that narrowed down the field. [F9N 249]

- Intuition
- Personal choice
- Types of conditionals

## Ellipsis in coordination

I'm really making a plea in the lectures that if the British want to get involved in Europe, they **should** show a few signs, be prepared to learn other languages, open up to other cultures. [A83 178]

- Three coordinated clauses (*should* elided twice), or one clause with three coordinate predications (no ellipsis)?
- Following Quirk et al. (1985: 944, 953) the latter approach is adopted.

## Embedded elliptical *if*-conditionals

They are people whom we rarely consider in this House, but when there is a suicide or accident on the railway, the driver, and his mate **if appropriate**, may be mentally scarred for life by the experience. [HHX 119]

- ? ... *the driver may be mentally scarred for life by the experience, and if there is a mate present, then the mate may be mentally scarred for life by the experience.*
- “*the driver, and his mate if appropriate*” can be treated as the subject of the clause.
- Ellipsis is not always a straightforward case of slot-filling.

## Discontinuous *if*-conditionals 1: Stem-List

Abdomen: When to seek advice

Urgently, Right now!

.....

If the stool is bloody, black or tar-like.

[B1R 681]

- The elided clause cannot be simply ‘slotted in’.
- The ‘full’ conditional will have to be reconstructed.

## Discontinuous *if*-conditionals 2: Question-Answer

-- Thank you again. What would it involve?

-- Two weeks' filming early January - if this three-day week nonsense doesn't interfere.

[GUF 2337]

-- "You intend to reside there ... wherever ... for some time?"

-- "If I like it."

[FPD 1593]

-- "How about a nice cup of tea?"

-- "Only if you let me make it."

[AN7 3512]

## Ellipsis and meaning

- Frequency may be an indicator.
- Example: Frequency of elliptical uses of '*if you + verb*' in the BNC:

### Operators

- *if you are* ( 2%)
- *if you do* ( 6%)

### Modals

- *if you can* ( 7%)
- *if you would* (12%)

### Catenative verbs

- *if you insist* (60%)
- *if you like* (73%)



## *If you like*

- *If you like* = if you want:

I can get you her address, **if you like**. [CB7 656]

- Metalinguistic comment:

Perhaps this is the point at which to mention an event's atmosphere, its charisma, its personality, **if you like**. [ADK 153]

## *if not* with an 'at least' interpretation

- Sample of 100 instances of *if not*:

- Straightforward ellipsis: 29%

The belief has grown that somewhere in the urban jungles, there lurk the dangerous classes who will, **if not** closely surveyed and controlled, challenge the peace of the streets. [G1J 1206]

- 'At least' interpretation: 71%

I got an education there that was as good as, **if not** better than, that I would have had at Westminster. [FYX 151]

## Considerations

- Even if possible, the recovery of the elided elements may not be helpful.
- It may not be useful to always treat ellipsis as a case of elements missing or represented by a counter.
  - It may not be possible to unpack and reconstruct the *if*-conditional, at least not without ‘tampering with the evidence’.
  - By transforming the example, we may end up analysing a different construction from the attested one, and, in a sense, ‘homogenising’ language use.
  - In some cases, examining them in their purportedly ‘full’ form, detracts from, rather than adds to, our understanding of their structure and meaning.
- **There seems to be a connection between ellipsis and meaning in *if*-conditionals.**

Can we always recover ellipsis?  
Ellipsis retains meaning.



Should we always recover ellipsis?  
Ellipsis can add meaning.

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