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FINDING ELLIPSIS IN SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLISH

With a minimum of necessary theorizing, an attempt is made to introduce a notion of Shakespeare's ellipsis which turns aside its usual overapplicability. From a variety of proposals grows a synthesis thereof, accentuating, it is hoped, a most scientifically attractive strain in the behavior of ellipsis – its contextual dependence. A preliminary look at Early Modern English, and Shakespeare's against it, prompts comments and warnings in the direction of greater relevance to my guidelines for recognizing instances of ellipsis.

That we can report an array of absences (syntactic, semantic, or both) in Shakespeare's English awakens no controversy. Whether all of those absences should be classified along the dimension of ellipsis is an important question. A question that has to be so answered as to rescue ellipsis from fading in powers to describe, to explain, and to exist. This is Thomas' (1979) warning, likely to have a relevance to English at every stage of its development. I argue that descriptions of Shakespeare's English have thus far missed an important insight that ellipsis is distinguished from other absences in terms of contextual dependence. It is thus my intent to give a greater degree of precision to the notion of ellipsis, and at the same time provide a basis for its identification in the corpus of Shakespeare's plays.

1. Ellipsis redefined

There is a vast literature behind Shakespeare's language indicating and emphasizing his ingeniously elliptical style. Although they clearly need to be addressed, not every one of those absences promotes a sense of genuine ellipsis. To capture this generalization it is essential that we treat ellipsis in a rule-governed way, acknowledging – as Kehler (2000, 2002) does – its anaphoric nature (that of structural and semantic incompleteness leading to discourse-based resolution) at all times. Beyond this fundamental scenario, there occurs a series of assumptions noted by linguists

over time, e.g. Halliday and Hasan (1976), Shopen and Swieczkowski (1976), Thomas (1979), Warner (1993), Hardt (1999).

- Firmly of the discourse world, ellipsis goes beyond the lower levels of linguistic description i.e. sentence and below.
- With mandatory structural and semantic gaps, ellipsis requires that the missing information be recoverable from the surrounding context, thus signaling contextual dependence.
- Discourse that surrounds ellipsis must invariably contain appropriate referents: linguistic ('fully specified linguistic form[s] with the same semantic content[s]') (Hankamer and Sag 1976:422) or non-linguistic antecedents that guarantee uncompromised recoverability of ellipsed material.¹

By way of clarity, we offer two caveats here. For one thing, ellipsis does not settle into a predictable pattern of sensitivity to non-linguistic antecedents, now accepting them (stripping, complement ellipsis), now mostly rejecting them (VP ellipsis, sluicing). For another, it is not consistent with respect to structural isomorphism between ellipsis sites and antecedents. Pseudogapping, for instance, has no records whatsoever of disobeying structural isomorphism.

- (1) SNUG: Have you the lion's part written? pray you, **if it be**, give it me, for I am slow of study.
(A Midsummer Night's Dream. I, II, 62–63) [VP ellipsis]
- (2) DUCHESS OF YORK: Nay, do not say, 'stand up;' Say, 'pardon' first, and afterwards 'stand up.' And if I were thy nurse, thy tongue to teach, 'Pardon' should be the first word of thy speech. I never long'd to hear a word till now; Say 'pardon,' king; let **pity teach thee how**:
(King Richard II. V, III, 112–117) [sluicing]
- (3) CLARENCE: His majesty Tendering my person's safety, hath appointed This conduct to convey me to the Tower.
 GLOUCESTER: Upon what cause?
 CLARENCE: **Because my name is George**.
(King Richard III. I, I, 42–46) [stripping]

– The union of the gap with its antecedent evokes strong directionalization and, for the most part, gives backward reference for ellipsis.²

¹ For subsequent revisions, see, for example, Sag and Hankamer (1984).

² Forward reference, i.e. cataphora, is only licensed if certain conditions are satisfied. This kind of reference is construed as never operating across sentential boundaries and hence inconsistent with our view of ellipsis.

– Elliptical constructions must additionally be placed in the environment of economical but still grammatically correct expression. This qualification has real distinction vis-à-vis some visibly vague descriptions of Shakespeare's ellipsis (cf. Houston 1988).³

If part of the meaning of a sentence is not made explicit as a result of a structural gap embedded therein, and provided all of the other criteria do hold, ellipsis it shall be. In a purely theoretical vein, the process could almost seem reduced to the status of negligible presence, so many strictures do the five points introduce into it. But admittedly, the usual understanding of ellipsis – even assuming its anaphoric side – views it as a process frequently finding its way into discourse.

Now, how does one locate ellipses? Gap diagnosing being but the initial – though most essential – step here, specifications like the one adduced by Görlach (2001) excellently serve our purpose as a preliminary search option.

Ellipsis is the omission of one or more words which the construction requires to be supplied, for the sake of brevity and elegance. There are few compound sentences, which are not in some sense elliptical: Syntax therefore cannot be perfectly taught, or understood, without a particular attention to this figure. (Harrison 1771:44)

We can, with some penetration, interpret ellipsis as a rule operative in phrases/sentences where a constituent is stranded that would normally not be so. That this promotes a sense of distinct dependence of ellipsis sites is an expected consequence.

The qualifications above lead to a different take on the notion of ellipsis. By putting forward an anaphoric basis for determination of ellipsis, it will only allow a limited number of ellipses, all of which are illustrated below.

(4) {Enter Gentleman.}

How now! are the horses ready?

Gentleman: **Ready**, my lord.

(*King Lear*. V, I, 47–48)

[stripping]

(5) CASSIO: A knave, teach me my duty! But I'll beat the knave into a wicker bottle.

RODERIGO: **Beat me?**

(*Othello*. II, III, 140–141)

[verbal operator ellipsis]

(6) LEWIS: I muse your majesty doth seem so cold,

When such profound respects do pull you on.

CARDINAL PANDULPH: I will denounce a curse upon his head.

KING PHILIP: **Thou shalt not need**. England, I will fall from thee.

(*King John*. III, I, 317–320)

[complement ellipsis]

³ Culicover and Jackendoff (2005: 234) make a seemingly different point: elliptical structures 'are not well-formed full syntactic sentences, but rather strings composed of one or more well-formed nonsentential phrases'. Crucially, a distinction has to be made between incomplete, hence not well-formed, 'syntactic sentences' that refer back to antecedents and those that do not. The latter are not elliptical.

- (7) JULIET: Can heaven be so envious?
Nurse: **Romeo can,**
Though heaven cannot: O Romeo, Romeo!
Who ever would have thought it? Romeo!
(*Romeo and Juliet*. III, II, 39–42) [VP ellipsis (VPE)]
- (8) Flight cannot stain the honor you have won;
But mine it will, that no exploit have done:
(*King Henry VI, Part I*. IV, V, 26–27) [pseudogapping]
- (9) TIMON: Near! why then, another time I'll hear thee:
I prithee, let's be provided to show them
entertainment.
FLAVIUS: [Aside] **I scarce know how.**
(*Timon of Athens*. I, II, 176–179) [sluicing]
- (10) MISTRESS QUICKLY: Peter Simple you say your name is?
SIMPLE: Ay, for fault of **a better.**
(*The Merry Wives of Windsor*. I, IV, 14–15) [nominal ellipsis]

What we are suggesting here is not quite that these examples of ellipsis are only familiar from Shakespeare's language. To the contrary, analogous ellipses have been encoded in English ever since the Old English period, though with varying degrees of generality. The next section discusses some of the specifics of Shakespeare's syntax so that we do not miss the insight that ellipsis is a little less predictable than might be thought.

2. Early Modern English in Shakespeare's hands

EModE may seem disorderly and inconsistent to the point of little formality of rule. Or alternatively, it may – and should too – stand as something of an abuse (within limits) of the freedom afforded by the grammar, relaxed as it is. The grammar the notion of which is nevertheless sufficiently concrete:

If grammar was so “uncertain” for Shakespeare's contemporaries, Hamlet could just as well have said, keeping his meter, “Not be to be or to,” but he did not. Ungrammatical languages exist only in the minds of those unskilled at linguistic analysis, and the confusion over grammar seems to have arisen from the large number of alternative forms in Elizabethan English (*he* and *'a*; *his* and *it* [possessive], and so forth), of which one can easily become aware while ignoring those of present-day English. (...) Obviously, the English that antedates dictionaries and adequate grammars, like the Greek that preceded the spread of the alphabet, risks being untidy, since there existed no handy editorial standard by which to tidy it up. In any case, true regularity and neatness, such as we find in elementary textbooks, have little to do with the grammatical structure of any real language; (...) In the proper hands, alternative means of expression can be precious (...) (Houston 1988:215)

Shakespeare merely shows how linguistic possibilities play out in the context of clearly Renaissance-specific fascination with humanity. Not only that, the key to understanding his language comes from the users' 'disposition to attempt the untried' (cf. Baugh 1974:303), and experimentation with Latin style.

Now, the obvious question is: which syntactic areas have a relevance to ellipsis?

2.1. Word order

Ellipsis and word order are not so cleanly linked that there is a need for thorough discussion. Rather, since some effects of word order can be seen in identification of ellipsis, we will only address those. As the EModE influences draw together to stretch the limit of grammatical acceptance, the major SVO word order is many a time departed from. Some hints toward the full extent of departures from SVO in poetry and prose are provided, for instance, by Houston (1988) and Bækken (2000), respectively.

Here is a sketch of Bækken's (2000) argument. He proposes to place important historical developments in a different timeframe. Of central interest is the distribution of inverted word orders in EModE offering a fresh perspective on the date that the tradition of using V2 order runs its course.⁴ Drawing from prose passages, Bækken (2000) notes persistent use over the period of V2 orders triggered off by initial adverbials. It is a reasonable assumption that if inversion tends to follow negative adverbials, ellipsis may also be involved. A pointed increase in inversion in such environments in later EModE, as shown in Table 1, indicates a corresponding potentially heavy dose of ellipsis.

Table 1. Word order in structures with negative initial elements (adapted from Bækken 2000:403)

	I: 1480–1530		II: 1580–1630		III: 1680–1730	
	no	%	no	%	no	%
XSV	78	77.2	29	16.9	11	6.1
XVS	23	22.8	143	83.1	169	93.9
Total	101	100.0	172	100.0	180	100.0

These facts do not automatically produce a tendency for analogous inversion and ellipsis to be reflected in literary style to the same extent. But in the corpus there are examples of VPE or pseudogapping following negative and non-negative (*so*) initial elements, all of them occurring as VS orders, and the former lower frequency (cf. 11–12).

⁴ In fact, Bækken (2000) is careful to note that his proposal is an extension of that by Nev-alainen (1997), which stands in stark contrast to previous accounts collapsing the transition from V2 to verb-medial word order with the ME changes.

- (11) My heart is turned to stone: and while 'tis mine
 It shall be stony. York not our old men spares;
No more will I their babes.
 (*Henry VI. Part V*, II, 50–53)
- (12) HASTINGS: With patience, noble lord, as prisoners must:
 But I shall live, my lord, to give them thanks
 That were the cause of my imprisonment.
 GLOUCESTER: No doubt, no doubt; **and so shall Clarence too;**
 (*King Richard III*, I, I, 125–128)

Literary style, however, produces tendencies that go back to earlier English, thereby frequently preserving, for instance, SOV order. Along with that, there is a taste for mapping Latin patterns into English. Both of these remarks are a fine insight into the practice of employing 'the ascending syntactic relations' (cf. Houston 1988:2, 14), which sees a verb coming last within a sentence. It is therefore not obvious in advance whether a stranded verb is instantiating ellipsis or an SOV order.

2.2. Modal verbs

The modals are pressed into service in EModE as both auxiliaries and verbs.⁵ Their behavior is thus not uniform. Nor are its consequences for ellipsis easily pur-

⁵ This distinction is due to Harris and Campbell (1995), who propose to treat the modals as modal verbs that, with time, develop auxiliary characteristics just as they lose their verb-like nature. This comes as a truer reflection of the gradual changes that Lightfoot (1979) sees as abrupt, the changes themselves accounted for in more plausible terms:

Under these assumptions, a requirement looms large that the premodals be reconstructed as covering both 'modal verbs' and 'modal auxiliaries', the latter the corollary of reanalysis dating from OE. The view further reports contiguity of the verb and the auxiliary – with the regular verb-like and auxiliary-like behavior projected as direct evidence of this fact – until EModE, a period which witnesses 'loss of the homophonous modal verbs, leaving the modal auxiliaries without parallel forms' (cf. Harris and Campbell 1995:178). With the view, the abrupt, largely simultaneous changes cataloged by Lightfoot (1979) in (175)–(176), which he places in Middle English and EModE, respectively, are cast into a more plausible mode, making allowances for individual rates of actualization of reanalysis for each verb, a true reflection of the non-uniformity recorded therein (cf. Nykiel 2006)

(1)

- (a) 'The antecedents of the modern modals ... lost the ability to take direct objects' (1979a: 101)
- (b) The modals were so-called preterite-presents, past-tense forms that had been reinterpreted as presents. Verbs of this class lacked the *-s* ending of the present. Loss of all other verbs of this class left the modals as constituting 'an identifiable class of verbs' (1979a: 103)

sued without this realization. To put it more concretely, I will approach the modals by proceeding in the direction from OE to EModE, noting the significance of their lingering verbal characteristics.

For the approach to be reliable it is clearly essential that a departure from and retention – if only partial – of the OE status both be noted. The patterns unambiguously retained are illustrated below:

– nominal complement:

- (13) SPEED. [Reads] Inprimis: she can milk
LANCE. Ay, **that she can.**
(*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. III, I, 295–296)
- (14) LEONTES. We'll part the time between's them; and in that
I'll no gainsaying.
(*The Winter's Tale*. I, II, 17–18)

– clausal complement:

- (15) JULIA: And yet **I would I had o'erlooked the letter:**
It were a shame to call her back again
(*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. I, II, 49–50)

– adverbial of direction following:

- (16) DUKE: Be it as you shall privately determine,
Either for stay or going, the affairs cry haste,
And speed must answer; **you must hence tonight.**
(*Othello*. I, III, 276–278)

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- (c) There was a breakdown in the present/past relationship of *can/could*, *shall/should*, *will/would*, and *may/might*. The preterits *must* and *ought* replaced the corresponding present-tense forms, taking on present meanings themselves
- (d) After the change from SOV to SVO order in Early Middle English, special rules applied to prevent occurrence of the order SVOM, which is attested only rarely.
- (e) The use of the *to*-infinitive gradually replaced that of the bare infinitive during Middle English, but the modals never adopted this.
- (2)
- (a) The modals lost the ability to occur as infinitives
- (b) The modals lost the *-ing* ending form
- (c) In most dialects a constraint against more than one modal per verb was introduced
- (d) The modals could no longer occur with *have* and an *-en* suffix (as *take* does in the expression *has taken*)
- (e) The rule of Negative Placement was reformulated to treat modals differently from verbs
- (f) The rule of Subject-Verb Inversion was reformulated to treat modals as auxiliaries
- (g) A new set of 'quasi-modals' – *be going to*, *have to*, *be able to* – was created that are true verbs but semantically equivalent to the modals.
(1979a:110–113)
(adapted from Harris and Campbell 1995:176–177)

The departure from OE goes down to the extent to which more properties have been adopted that are standardly called NICE(R).⁶

- a. (Finite) Negation: Lee will not eat apples / *Kim eats not apples.
- b. Inversion: Has Lee eaten apples? / *Eats Lee apples?
- c. Contraction of *not*: *didn't*, *shouldn't* / **eatn't*
- d. (VP-) Ellipsis: Kim isn't kicking the ball, but Lee is _ / *but Lee likes _
(adapted from Sag 2005:4)

One will not get far by overly relying on the distinctness of some of these features in EModE. With speakers/writers drawing upon available sentence structures, neither negation (cf. 17–18) nor inversion (cf. 19–20) is exceptional against the background of full verb.

(17) TALBOT: My thoughts are whirled like a potter's wheel;

I know not where I am, nor what I do;

(*King Henry VI. Part I. I, V, 20*)

(18) DESDEMONA: Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?

EMILIA: Why, would not you?

(*Othello. IV, III, 62–63*)

(19) QUINCE: What sayest thou, bully Bottom?

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream. III, I, 8*)

(20) LUCIUS: Can the son's eye behold his father bleed?

(*Titus Andronicus. V, III, 66*)

What is exceptional is also a little problematic for ellipsis. The overall behavior of the modals affords a deeper understanding of why both complement and VP ellipsis are possible interpretations, depending on whether a modal verb or a modal auxiliary is involved. This in fact points to a two-way classification of the cases where the modals are stranded. The trouble with ellipsis is then that it does not permit the modals to be neatly set aside, since they also enable the kind of ellipsis that is found in ordinary lexical verbs. However, in the corpus we encounter no more than three instances of complement ellipsis with the modals (compared to a few hundred instances of VP ellipsis), their low frequency telling in favor of a major change underway.

⁶ I am following here the perspective adopted by Sag (2005:4), which includes addition of another feature, referred to as Reaffirmation:

A: Kim won't read it.

B: Kim will *tóo* / *só* read it.

A lesson taught by Sag is that there is no reaffirmation of the kind with lexical verbs:

a. *Kim will *tóo* / *só* read it.

b. *Kim reads *too* / *so* it.

- (21) BUCKINGHAM: I am thus bold to put your grace in mind
 Of what you promised me.
 KING RICHARD III: Well, but what's o'clock?
 BUCKINGHAM: Upon the stroke of ten.
 KING RICHARD III: Well, let it strike.
 BUCKINGHAM: Why let it strike?
 KING RICHARD III: Because that, like a Jack, thou keep'st the stroke
 Betwixt thy begging and my meditation.
 I am not in the giving vein to-day.
 BUCKINGHAM: Why, then resolve me **whether you will or no**.
 KING RICHARD III: Tut, tut,
 Thou troublest me; am not in the vein.
 (*King Richard III*. IV, II, 111–122)
- (22) KING PHILIP: O fair affliction, peace!
 CONSTANCE: No, no, **I will not**, having breath to cry:
 O, that my tongue were in the thunder's mouth!
 Then with a passion would I shake the world;
 And rouse from sleep that fell anatomy
 Which cannot hear a lady's feeble voice,
 Which scorns a modern invocation.
 (*King John*. III, IV, 36–72)
- (23) LAERTES: It is here, Hamlet: Hamlet, thou art slain;
 No medicine in the world can do thee good;
 In thee there is not half an hour of life;
 The treacherous instrument is in thy hand,
 Unbated and envenom'd: the foul practice
 Hath turn'd itself on me lo, here I lie,
 Never to rise again: thy mother's poison'd:
I can no more: the king, the king's to blame.
 (*Hamlet*. V, II, 309–316)

3. Shakespearean ellipsis in researchers' hands

This section sketches previous analyses of Shakespeare's English along the dimension of absence. It reports on views that lack a coherent notion of absence and are largely determined by an indiscriminate use of the term ellipsis. And ultimately, it partitions absences into elisions (omissions recoverable from the linguistic system alone rather than the context, cf. Thomas 1979) and ellipses according to the specifications in Section 1.

The contrast between elision and ellipsis shows itself in examples like (24) offered by McKenzie (1987), where there is an elision (not ellipsis, as he claims) of complementizer *that*.

- (24) LORENZO: Hold here, take this: tell gentle Jessica
 I will not fail her; speak it privately.
 (*The Merchant of Venice*. II, IV, 20–21)

Parenthetically, McKenzie also sees ellipsis in (25), which is more felicitously collapsed with gapping.⁷

- (25) chapels had been churches and poor men's
 cottages princes' palaces.
 (*The Merchant of Venice*. I, II, 13–14)

Blake (1983:103) and Houston (1988:37) argue along similar lines positing ellipsis in (26)–(27). These are again better viewed as instances of elision with an auxiliary missing.

- (26) Sweet recreation barr'd, what doth ensue
 But moody and dull melancholy,
 (*The Comedy of Errors*. V, I, 88–89)
- (27) Each several article herein redress'd,
 All members of our cause, both here and hence,
 That are insinew'd to this action,
 (*King Henry IV Part II*. IV, I, 170–172)

Such omissions can hardly compete with ellipsis; worse still, they are hardly omissions, for their links with linguistic convention.

Grammarians are sometimes given to describing what are properly called minor sentence forms as having been subjected to excision of this or that, when there was nothing in them in the first place to be removed. Languages were not created in the image of an elementary textbook from which all deviations must be considered later changes. Shakespeare has seized on an expressive usage uncommon in the rather grandiose Renaissance notion of written style and made it work splendidly (Houston 1988:35–36).

In Shakespeare's language there are indeed few constraints on the 'expressive usage':

- (28) And if we live, we live to tread on kings;
If die, brave death, when princes die with us!
 (*King Henry IV Part I*. V, II, 89–90)

Absence of a verb, however, does not necessarily provide a basis for elision only. (28) – due to Houston (1988:203) – for example, is instantiating stripping, whose anaphoric dependence on the antecedent is immediately clear.

- (29) How found you him?
 ARVIRAGUS: **Stark**, as you see:
 Thus smiling, as some fly hid tickled slumber,

⁷ For differences between ellipsis and gapping, see Kehler (2002), (Nykiel 2006).

Not as death's dart, being laugh'd at; his
right cheek
Reposing on a cushion.
(*Cymbeline*. IV, II, 203–208)

Wikberg (1975:135–136) has more examples to this effect:

- (30) HAMLET: O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a
thousand pound. Didst perceive?
HORATIO: **Very well, my lord.**
(*Hamlet*. III, II, 279–281)

His approach expresses the generalization that an ellipsis site shows 'a kind of structural dependence on a preceding clause' (cf. Wikberg's 1975:136), thus participating in an anaphoric dimension of ellipsis.

Given my formal guidelines, it is hard to balance the notion of absence with (31)–(32), sentences that have been called elliptical by Houston (1988) and Blake (1983), respectively.

- (31) Stand;
Or we are Romans and will give you that
Like beasts which you shun beastly, and may save,
But to look back in frown: stand, stand.'
These three,
Three thousand confident, in act as many –
For three performers are the file when all
(*Cymbeline*. V, III, 24–30)
- (32) But that the good mind of Camillo tardied
My swift command, though I with death and with
Reward did threaten and encourage him,
Not doing 't and being done⁸: he, most humane
(*The Winter's Tale*. III, II, 159–162)

I take these instances to further support the case that there is a fine line between ellipsis resolved via reference to an antecedent and what looks to be merely a concise style (31)–(32) clearly illustrate the latter, for there are no antecedents for the phrases in bold to refer to.

3. Conclusion

Shakespeare's elliptical clauses have real distinction. If they are both necessarily incomplete and context-dependent, one could hazard a guess that antecedents play

⁸ Here Blake's interpretation is: *If he did not do it, and if it was done.*

a central role in determination of ellipsis, the other constraints always assumed to obtain. There is subtle evidence that Shakespeare's ellipsis has not been consistently treated via such anaphoric selection.

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