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Non-Sentential Assertions and Semantic Ellipsis

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NON-SENTENTIAL ASSERTIONS AND SEMANTIC ELLIPSIS

1. INTRODUCTION[1]

We take it that the following Claim is at least initially plausible:

(1)   The Claim: Speakers can make assertions by uttering ordinary, unembedded, words and phrases.[2]

Some examples. One can easily imagine someone, say Andy, approaching an apple cart and producing the word "red" on its own, not within any sentence, thereby making an assertion. Or again: one can imagine Andy pointing at a man near the door and saying the phrase "John's father" on its own, thereby making an assertion. What's more, imaginary examples aside, it would seem that the use of ordinary words and phrases in isolation is a ubiquitous feature of *actual* linguistic communication.

Despite its initial plausibility, some philosophers are prone to deny that the Claim is, in fact, true. As an example, consider the following passage from Michael Dummett's work:

... you cannot *do* anything with a word – cannot effect any conventional (linguistic) act by uttering it – save by uttering some sentence containing that word .... (Dummett 1973, p. 194)

The temptation to deny the Claim may arise from a perceived tension between it and a view about the primacy of sentences; a view according

[2] By "in isolation", "unembedded" and such we mean *not within a containing sentence*, rather than *not part of a larger discourse*. The Claim, then, entails that a speaker can make an assertion without using a sentence.

to which (a) only sentences can be used to make assertions and (b) only sentences are meaningful in isolation. Dummett writes:

A sentence is, as we have said, the smallest unit of language with which a linguistic act can be accomplished, with which 'a move can be made in the language game' . . . (Dummett 1973, p. 194)

. . . . assertion consists in the (deliberate) utterance of *a sentence* which, by its form and context, is recognized as being used according to a certain general convention . . . . (Dummett 1973, p. 311, our emphasis)

It is only in the context of a sentence that a word has a meaning. (Dummett 1981, p. 360)

If the Claim is true, it would seem that not just sentences, but also words and phrases can be used in isolation; and not just sentences, but also words and phrases are meaningful in isolation.[3]

Of course everyone agrees that speakers *appear* to produce ordinary words and phrases in isolation. To account for the appearances, while denying the Claim, one must maintain something like the following:

(2)   *The Ellipsis Hypothesis*: Whenever a speaker makes an assertion by uttering an (apparently) unembedded word or phrase, what that speaker really utters is an elliptical sentence.

The burden of this paper is to support the Claim by arguing against the ellipsis hypothesis. Before turning to that, however, let us explain the Claim in greater detail, by laying out what we mean by "phrase".

1.1. THE SYNTAX AND SEMANTICS OF PHRASES

We assume that the notion "word" is clear enough for our purposes. But what are phrases, syntactically speaking? X-bar theory, described in Jackendoff (1977), Chomsky (1981, 1982, 1986a), Haegeman (1991) and references cited there, provides a very general answer to this question. According to X-bar theory, every formative has (at some level of representation) the following form – called the X-BAR SCHEMA:

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[3] For discussion of the primacy of sentences, see Davidson (1967), Evans (1982, p. 67), Hacking (1975) and the literature on Frege's (1978) so-called "context principle". It is our view that ordinary words and phrases can be used in isolation to perform a wide range of speech acts. However, because of the philosophical centrality of assertion, we focus upon it. For extended discussion of the philosophical implications of the use of ordinary words and phrases to make assertions see Stainton (1993).

(3)

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              XP
            /    \
   Specifier of X    X'
                   /    \
                 X    Complement of X
```
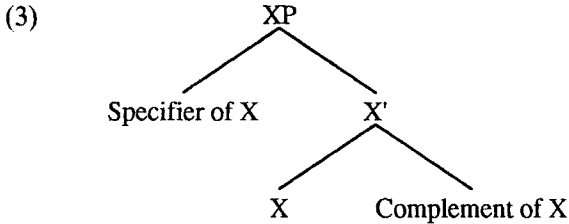
Formatives – substitution instances of this schema – are created by substituting a CATEGORY VARIABLE for X, and placing below the resulting nodes particular items of the appropriate category.

Importantly, there are *two types* of category variables. On the one hand, there are the lexical categories. These include Noun, Verb, Preposition, Adjective and Adverb. Lexical categories dominate open classes of words; classes to which new members can be freely added. On the other hand, there are NON-LEXICAL categories. Of particular interest to us is the category INFL.

INFL dominates the inflectional morphology of the verb (i.e., subject-verb agreement), tense markers and any infinitival markers (e.g., "to" in English). In English, INFL also dominates a closed class of words, consisting of the aspectual auxiliaries ("have" and "be") and the modals ("will", "can", "may", "shall" and "must").

By substituting INFL for X in the X-bar schema we arrive at (4), the general form of *sentences*. (Elsewhere in the grammar it is stated that the specifier of I is NP, and that the complement of I is CP or VP.)

(4)

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           IP
         /    \
       NP      I'
             /    \
           I     CP/VP
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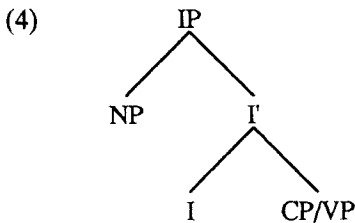
By filling in particular formatives under NP, I and CP/VP, we produce a specific sentence. For instance, taking [$_{NP}$ The Queen of England] as the Noun Phrase, [$_{INFL}$ present/singular] as INFL and [$_v$ be [$_{PP}$ in France]] as the Verb Phrase, the result is:

(5)
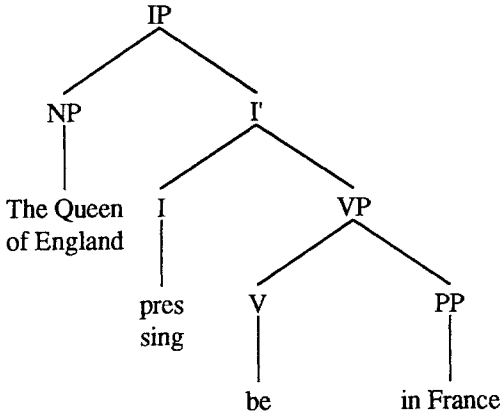
Any formative headed by INFL is a *sentence*.[4] A *phrase*, on the other hand, is any formative headed by a lexical category. This will serve as our syntactic characterization of the class of phrases.

The semantics of words and phrases is typically treated rather differently from that of sentences. Sentences – declarative sentences anyway – express propositions.[5] Ordinary words and phrases do not. Following Lewis (1970), Dowty, Wall and Peters (1981), Bach (1989) and Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet (1990) among many others, we divide words and phrases semantically into (at least) three basic SEMANTIC TYPES. These are:

(6)   *Semantic type one*: formatives that express individual concepts

(7)   *Semantic type two*: formatives that express properties

(8)   *Semantic type three*: formatives that express generalized quantifiers, where a generalized quantifier is a function from properties to propositions.

The most important thing to notice about the foregoing is this: declarative sentences – including elliptical sentences – express none of these three semantic types.[6] Furthermore, whereas declarative sentences exhibit

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[4] Complementizer Phrases (CPs) are also projected from non-lexical heads, i.e., COMP. For our purposes, however, we can ignore this complication.

[5] To be more precise, declarative sentences express propositional characters, in the sense of Kaplan (1977): functions from contexts to propositions. See also Stalnaker (1978). We abstract away from this complication throughout.

[6] A note on empirical commitments: Obviously, X-bar theory and Montague-style semantics may turn out to be incorrect – particularly about details. It is reasonable to inquire, therefore, how much our conclusions rest upon the minutia of these theories. The details are not, we think, essential. For the sake of explicitness, it is important to adopt a single framework. And we do believe that Montague-style semantics, and X-bar syntax, are among the most promising, most specific and most accurate of those available. But, so far as we can see anyway, our *conclusions* do not stand or fall with the specifics of these particular theories. Nor do our *arguments* depend especially on the notation in which they are couched: a greatly

illocutionary force (i.e., they are typically used to assert), it will become clear that ordinary words and phrases are not force bearing in this way.

We should stress: we will be drawing a contrast between words and phrases (i.e., expression types) and declarative sentences (again: expression types). At issue is the content and force of the *expressions themselves* – not utterances of them. As we shall see, there is a sense in which declarative sentence types can truly be said to have assertoric force – because they have assertion as their recognized standard use. But the same cannot be truly said of word and phrase types. Word tokens and phrase tokens often exhibit assertoric force; but word types and phrase types do not.

This distinction (between propositional and non-propositional semantic types; force bearing and non-force bearing expressions) will serve as the basis for our semantic characterization of ordinary words and phrases: semantically speaking, ordinary words and phrases are assigned to non-propositional semantic types (including the three noted above) and they do not exhibit illocutionary force.

Given this syntactic and semantic characterization of phrasehood we may now re-state the Claim:

(1)   *The Claim*: Speakers can make assertions by uttering formatives which: (a) are members of, or are headed by, a lexical category; (b) are assigned to non-propositional semantic types; and (c) do not exhibit illocutionary force.

The Claim can be denied, while still making sense of appearances, by maintaining either of the following ellipsis hypotheses – or some combination thereof:

(2a)   *The Syntactic Ellipsis Hypothesis*: Whenever a speaker makes an assertion by uttering an (apparently) unembedded word or phrase, what that speaker really utters is an elliptical sentence in the sense that the (*partially unpronounced*) *Syntactic Structure of the uttered expression is headed by INFL*.

(2b)   *The Semantic Ellipsis Hypothesis*: Whenever a speaker makes an assertion by uttering an unembedded word or phrase, what that speaker really utters is an elliptical sentence *in the sense that* (a) *the semantic type of the expression uttered is propositional and* (b) *the expression uttered has illocutionary force*.

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simplified version of Chomsky's Principles and Parameters framework. See Chomsky (1986b) for an overview.

These are, so far as we know, the only possible construals of the ellipsis hypothesis. Hence, if both are incorrect, then the ellipsis hypothesis is false. In which case, one cannot help but endorse the Claim.

The syntactic ellipsis hypothesis, in one incarnation or another, has received considerable attention in the linguistics literature. Early on, Morgan (1973) provided several solid arguments in favour of syntactic ellipsis. But, since then, Barton (1989, 1990), Brame (1979), Dalrymple (1991), Napoli (1982), Stainton (1993, In preparation) and Yanofsky (1978) have provided convincing evidence that speakers sometimes use (i.e., speak, inscribe, or otherwise token) expressions which are not syntactically sentential. Even Morgan (1989) now concedes that *some* "fragments" (though not all) are best handled as utterances of words or phrases, rather than utterances of syntactically elliptical sentences. Given the mounting consensus against the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis, in what follows we will assume that it alone cannot explain the (apparent) use of unembedded words and phrases. The only escape from the Claim, then, is the semantic ellipsis hypothesis. If the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis works for *no* fragments – as Barton (1990) believes – the semantic ellipsis hypothesis must handle all assertoric uses of words and phrases. If the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis works for *some but not all* fragments, the semantical ellipsis hypothesis must cover those fragments not dealt with by the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis. In the remaining sections of this paper we argue that the semantic ellipsis hypothesis is not up to either task.

2. THE SEMANTIC ELLIPSIS HYPOTHESIS

To flesh out the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, we offer an example.[7] A typical speaker can make assertions by saying (9) on its own. Let us suppose Mary says it, thereby asserting that there is a fire nearby.

(9)   fire

According to the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, this is not a case of uttering an ordinary word or phrase; rather, what gets produced in this case is a sentence, in the semantic sense. This sentence expresses a proposition (in particular, that there is a fire nearby) and has illocutionary force (in particular, assertoric force).

Here is a helpful mnemonic: on the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, when

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[7] Here and elsewhere we sometimes intentionally omit punctuation in the examples. To do otherwise might inadvertently influence one's take on the example, either for or against the semantic ellipsis hypothesis.

speakers (appear to) utter ordinary words and phrases, what they really produce are one-word or one-phrase sentences. The semantic type of these one-word and one-phrase sentences is, the story goes, propositional. But, according to the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, these expressions are not syntactically sentential: they are not headed by INFL. Furthermore, these one-word and one-phrase sentences have illocutionary force. (It is in this semantic sense that, the proponent of the semantic ellipsis hypothesis says, they are "really" sentences, and not words and phrases at all.)

So: on the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, the sound *fire* is actually ambiguous. On the one hand, we are told, the sound *fire* corresponds to *the ordinary word* "fire". That word is a noun that occurs within sentences. The semantic type of this noun is an individual concept. Furthermore, the ordinary word "fire" – because it occurs *within* sentences – has no illocutionary force at all. On the other hand, goes the story, the sound fire also corresponds to *the one-word sentence* "fire" (maybe better: "Fire!"). The semantic type of this one-word sentence is propositional. What's more, the one-word sentence "fire" has assertoric force.

The semantic ellipsis hypothesis is importantly different from the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis. According to the latter, but not the former, utterances of (apparent) words and phrases inevitably have sentential Syntactic Structures. That is, only the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis is committed to the view that every assertoric utterance has a Syntactic Structure of the following form:

(10)

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            IP
           /  \
         NP    I'
              /  \
             I    VP/CP
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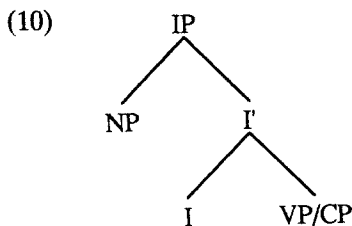
The contrast between the two hypotheses can be brought out sharply by applying the question in (11).[8]

(11)   What is the subject, verb and inflection of the expression uttered?

Suppose we ask this question about Mary's assertoric utterance of "fire".

When asked (11), a proponent of the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis might reply that the (unpronounced) subject of Mary's sentence is the expletive

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[8] We are indebted to Sylvain Bromberger for this insightful illustration of the difference between the two ellipsis hypotheses.

"there" and the (unpronounced) verb of her sentence is "to be", in present singular.

A proponent of the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, on the other hand, will reply that the question has a false presupposition. The expression which Mary uttered, according to the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, contains no subject, no verb, and no inflectional element. Mary uttered the one-word sentence "fire". And, according to the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, though the one-word sentence "fire" is assigned a propositional character and assertoric force by the semantics of English, it is not a syntactic sentence. (That is, its Syntactic Structure is not headed by INFL).

3. AGAINST THE SEMANTIC ELLIPSIS HYPOTHESIS

3.1. *Illocutionary Force*

In this section we will argue that when speakers (appear to) assertorically utter a simple word or phrase, the expressions they produce do not have illocutionary force. As illocutionary force is a property of semantic sentences, this will establish that what speakers produce are not semantic sentences.

Our argument will proceed as follows. First, we will consider several syntactic sentences (that is, maximal projections of an inflectional element), which *do* have illocutionary force. This will give us an intuitive grasp of the property which these linguistic representations share. We will then inquire whether, according to our understanding, these so-called one-word and one-phrase sentences exhibit this same property. Our conclusion will be that they do not. Hence they are not really semantic sentences at all.

First, however, we repeat our word of caution: the issue will not be whether *utterances* of these so-called one-phrase sentences exhibit illocutionary force. It is a platitude that whenever someone asserts, commands, or asks their utterance has illocutionary force. Since it is part of our claim that these expressions – whether they turn out to be ordinary words and phrases or semantically elliptical sentences – are commonly used to make assertions, we of course agree that utterances of them have illocutionary force; in particular, some have assertoric force. The question at hand concerns the *expressions*, not utterances of them. That is, to employ some standard vocabulary: we are inquiring about the properties had by certain linguistic types, not their tokens. Our conclusion shall be that these linguistic types do not have illocutionary force.

Here then are some paradigm cases of sentences which do have illocutionary force:

(12)   Snow is white
(13)   Is John wearing a hat?
(14)   Montevideo is the capital of Uruguay
(15)   Buy war bonds

Here is our hypothesis: taken apart from any context, someone who knows English can make an educated guess about what a speaker of each expression would be doing. This, we think, is the property which all expressions with illocutionary force share.

Now let us consider again the examples with which we began, and inquire whether, independent of extra-linguistic context, a hearer can form an initial hypothesis – an educated first guess – about the illocutionary force of *utterances* of these expressions:

(16)   Red
(17)   John's father

It is clear that, unless we specify *some* extra-linguistic context, knowledge of English does not give any idea of what a speaker of these expressions might be doing – not even an educated first guess.

The same is true for words and phrases generally: without knowing something about the extra-linguistic context, one cannot even form an initial hypothesis about what act a speaker would be performing by saying an (apparent) word or phrase.

We conclude, therefore, that these expressions do not have illocutionary force. Hence they are not semantically elliptical sentences. And they can be assertorically uttered. Hence the semantic ellipsis hypothesis is false.[9]

3.2. *Against the Restricted Semantic Ellipsis Hypothesis*

Given that (purported) one-word and one-phrase sentences do not exhibit illocutionary force, let us weaken the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, leaving out the condition that these expressions must have illocutionary force. The result is the restricted semantic ellipsis hypothesis:

(2b')   *The Restricted Semantic Ellipsis Hypothesis*: Whenever a speaker makes an assertion by uttering an unembedded word or phrase, what that speaker really utters is an elliptical sen-

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[9] The influence of Katz on the foregoing discussion should be obvious. We consider his defense of such diagnostics in Katz (1980, chap. 1) to be satisfactory.

tence *in the sense that the semantic type of the expression uttered is propositional.*

We will now argue that even this restricted hypothesis is false. Since the original semantic ellipsis hypothesis entails the restricted semantic ellipsis hypothesis, the former is false if the latter is.

3.2.1. *Ambiguity*

In what follows we will argue that, on the restricted semantic ellipsis hypothesis, (so-called) one-word and one-phrase sentences are multiply ambiguous. Treating these expressions as multiply ambiguous is implausible on the face of it.

Consider the following contexts in which someone might say "red".

First Situation: A doctor is testing her patient for colour blindness. She shows the patient paint samples, to see which ones he can distinguish. Upon presenting him with a red paint sample, the patient produces the word "red", thereby asserting that the displayed paint sample is red.

Second Situation: Several friends are discussing their favourite thing about life. One says his favourite thing is Woody Allen movies; another says it is dancing; still another has an inclination toward ham salad sandwiches. The most poetic of the group produces the word "red". In so saying, he asserts that the colour red is his favourite thing about life.

Third Situation: An art dealer is looking over some new paintings by an abstract artist. The first ten have been painted entirely in shades of red. He looks at the next one, looks all around the room, and complains: "red". Here he might assert that all the paintings in the room are red.

Fourth Situation: An interior decorator is telling his client what colour he plans to paint the rooms of the client's house. He walks into the bathroom, and says "baby blue". He proceeds into the bedroom and mumbles "red". What he asserts thereby is that red is a colour he should use in the bedroom.

We believe these four situations illustrate that, on the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, the purported semantically elliptical (i.e., one-word) sentence "red" must be multiply ambiguous. Let us stress that this is not simply a case of context dependence – like that exemplified by tense markers, pronouns, and the like. It is a real ambiguity: multiple meanings assigned not just to different utterances of "red", but to the *expression* "red". The four different propositions expressed in the four described situations cannot result simply from indexicality, because they have different propositional forms. And *propositional form* – i.e., the *kind* of proposition exhibited by an expression – is not the sort of thing that is context

dependent; though the particular proposition expressed may, of course, vary. In a word: a univocal expression must have a single semantic type. Hence a univocal expression E cannot, in context A, express a proposition of (say) argument-predicate form and, in context B, express a proposition of quantificational form – even if the expression E does contain indexicals.[10]

But now consider again the four uses of "red"; they have the four distinct semantic types associated with sentences (18a) through (18d) respectively:

(18)a. That paint sample is red
     b. Red is my favourite colour
     c. Every painting is red
     d. Red is a colour I should use in the bedroom

The sentence (18a) – and hence the supposed one-word sentence "red" as uttered in the first situation – expresses a proposition with argument-predicate form, where the predicate is RED. Its translation in the predicate calculus would be something like "Red (that-paint-sample)".

The two propositions communicated by uttering "red" in the second and third situations do not have argument-predicate form: one describes an identity between properties, that would be rendered as "Red = My-Favourite-Colour" in the predicate calculus; the other expresses a universal quantification, namely:

(19)   (For every x)[Painting(x) → Red(x)]

The proposition expressed by sentence (18d) – and by the word "red" in the fourth situation – does have argument-predicate form. But here RED is the argument, not the predicate. Its translation into the predicate calculus would have the form "Colour-I-should-use-for-the-bedroom(Red)", where "Colour-I-should-use-for-the-bedroom" expresses a second order property.

As we said, the *form* of the proposition expressed by a sentence is not the sort of thing that varies according to context; a univocal expression cannot have more than one semantic type. Therefore, to account for these

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[10] A possible exception to this generalization, noted by one of the reviewers, would be sentences containing indexicals which refer to propositions. (We would add: such that the proposition referred to changes the propositional form of the whole. The latter condition excludes "That is what John believes" as a counter instance to our generalization since, we take it, this sentence *always* expresses a relation between John and some propositional object.) Whether or not there are such sentences, it is clear that the one-word sentence "red" – having no hidden structure – is not one of them. So the variation in propositional form exhibited by uses of "red" cannot result from indexical reference to a proposition.

four different uses of "red", the semantic ellipsis theorist must admit that the expression – the (so-called) one-word sentence "red" – is ambiguous, having at least the following meanings:

1.   The one-word sentence "red" expresses the proposition that the (contextually specified) object O is red.

2.   The one-word sentence "red" expresses the proposition that the colour red has the (contextually specified) second order property P.

3.   The one-word sentence "red" expresses the proposition that the colour red is numerically identical to the (contextually specified) property P.

4.   The one-word sentence "red" expresses the proposition that the (contextually specified) generalized quantifier ⟨Q, P⟩ applies to the colour red. (For example, the quantifier ⟨Every, painting⟩ applies to red).

In short, on the semantic ellipsis hypothesis, the one-word sentence "red" will be at least four ways ambiguous. The same holds for one-word and one-phrase sentences generally. This postulation of meanings is implausible and ad hoc. We should, therefore, reject the semantic ellipsis hypothesis.

3.2.2. *How Many Semantically Elliptical Sentences Would There Be?*

It seems to us that what initially motivates the semantic ellipsis hypothesis is a pretheoretical intuition: "Those are just one-word sentences". Spelling out this intuition – in a way that distinguishes it from a mere re-statement of the Claim – requires the introduction of a new class of expressions: things which can be used assertorically, are syntactically non-sentential, but which nevertheless are *not* ordinary words and phrases. Introducing this new class is innocent and plausible enough – as long as said class remains fairly small. However – a minor point, but one worth making – if the semantic ellipsis hypothesis were true, there would be a *very large* class of one-word and one-phrase sentences, in addition to the infinitely large class of syntactic sentences and the infinitely large class of ordinary words and phrases.[11] We do not know how to *prove* that the class of one-word and one-phrase sentences is very large. But consider this rather lengthy list of examples. Any of them could be used to make an assertion;

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[11] What's more, if the semantic ellipsis hypothesis is true, speakers and hearers know the meaning of every expression in this very large class. It is this knowledge which explains their ability to use and construe these so-called one-word sentences and one-phrase sentences.

even in those discourse positions – like discourse initial position – which disallow syntactic ellipsis. (See Barton 1990, and Yanofsky 1978, for discussion.)

(20)a.   Nice dress
    b.   To Cathy, from Santa
    c.   A great idea which came from a great thinker
    d.   Emergency generator shut-down in Building 20
    e.   Black coffee with no sugar
    f.   A good talker who knows a lot about literature
    g.   Marilyn's portrait from the Steinhem collection
    h.   My poor baby (Quirk et al 1985, p. 850)
    i.   Another incredibly stupid picture
    j.   Dinner for seven
    k.   The door to the left of that blue painting

This makes the semantic ellipsis hypothesis rather less appealing. It may be easy enough to suppose that there are a scattered few one-word and one-phrase sentences, just like idioms and such. Indeed, if there were just a few, one could give their meaning by providing a short list. But, if semantically elliptical sentences are to do the work demanded of them, there cannot be just a few of them: if the proponent of the semantic ellipsis hypothesis is to handle *all* possible assertoric utterances of (apparent) words or phrases, then he must postulate a very large class of extra formatives. To assign them their meaning, his theory must specify recursive, compositional rules which yield propositional meanings for each member of this enormous class. Rules which, it's worth stressing, apply to syntactically non-sentential expressions which nevertheless are not ordinary words and phrases. The resulting machinery is, therefore, additional to that required for assigning meanings to ordinary words, phrases, and syntactic sentences.

That the semantic ellipsis hypothesis requires its proponents to postulate many many extra expressions, and wholly unfamiliar compositional semantic rules for them, is not a good thing. But it is not ultimately damning. Much more damaging is the fact that, so far as we can see, the introduction of semantically elliptical sentences does no explanatory work.

3.2.3. *Explanatory Power*

The greatest problem facing the semantic ellipsis hypothesis is that no extra explanatory power is achieved by attributing knowledge of one-word and one-phrase sentences. We cannot give the detailed arguments here. That requires an entire paper: Stainton (1994). But, here is a sketch.

Evidently, in order to use and construe syntactic sentences – that is, Inflectional Phrases – the speaker/hearer needs to know the meaning of ordinary words and phrases. After all, the meaning of whole sentences is built up from these smaller constituents. And, to use and construe syntactic sentences, the speaker/hearer needs at least some pragmatic devices. So: we already know that these competences are present. However – and this is the crucial premise, argued for at length in Stainton (1994) – given *only* knowledge of the meaning of ordinary words and phrases, and a limited range of pragmatic devices (i.e., devices like those described in Sperber and Wilson (1986)), a speaker could make non-sentential assertions; and, given *only* knowledge of the meaning of ordinary words and phrases, and a limited range of pragmatic devices, a hearer could interpret utterances of ordinary words and phrases as assertions. In a nutshell: already attested competences are alone sufficient for using and construing ordinary words and phrases in isolation. Hence there is no reason to introduce, as an extra competence, knowledge of one-word and one-phrase sentences.

Take one example. It is true enough that an individual whose idiolect contained the one-word sentence "red", assigned the propositional character THE SALIENT OBJECT IS RED, would be able to construe the sound *red* as, e.g., an assertion that a displayed paint sample was red. But, it seems to us, another individual whose idiolect *lacked* the one-word sentence "red", but contained the ordinary word "red", would *also* be able to understand the sound in this way – essentially because the meaning of the ordinary word "red" could not be relevant. (Only propositions can be relevant, and the ordinary unembedded word "red" does not express a proposition.) Hence, to interpret the speaker, the hearer would automatically search for a relevant proposition; one which the speaker could have meant. The proposition that the displayed paint sample is red is an obvious candidate.[12]

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[12] Here is another example; an "intuition pump" that may soften up some readers. Let us stipulate that the word "rojo", in Mark's version of Renglish, is *not* a one-word sentence. It is simply an ordinary adjective, which denotes the property shared by all red things. Let us further stipulate that Mark, who is just learning Renglish, has not yet learned any one-word or one-phrase sentences. Mark is having eye trouble again, and goes in for a colour perception test. The Renglish doctor shows Mark the first paint sample, which Mark perceives as red. Mark recognizes the colour, and recalls that in Renglish this colour is called "rojo". But he cannot form the Renglish equivalent of "That is red". Maybe he forgets how. Nor, we are supposing, does he know any one-word or one-phrase sentence of Renglish which means the same as "That is red". Suppose Mark simply says *the word* "rojo", hoping that the doctor will understand that the sample appears red to him. Is this scenario not *possible*? Our intuition is that it is. Of course one wants to know *exactly* what goes on in the interpretive process. For instance: how would the doctor figure out Mark's communicate intentions? This

Given this, should we say that typical English speakers know *both* the ordinary word "red" and the one-word sentence "red"? Not unless this gains us sufficient explanatory power. Which, we maintain, it does not. We can explain the use of the sound *red* in isolation without introducing the one-word sentence. So we should not introduce it. Of course the same holds for purported one-word and one-phrase sentences generally: each requires positing extra knowledge without any corresponding extra explanatory power; which violates Occam's Razor.

4. CONCLUSION

The restricted semantic ellipsis hypothesis, we have argued, is committed to an enormous number of multiply ambiguous expressions, the introduction of which gains us no extra explanatory power. We should, therefore, reject it. We should also spurn the original version since: (a) it entails the restricted version and (b) it incorrectly declares that, whenever a speaker makes an assertion by uttering an unembedded word or phrase, the expression uttered has illocutionary force.

Once rejected, the semantic ellipsis hypothesis cannot account for the many exceptions to the syntactic ellipsis hypothesis. So, we can safely infer that the Claim is true.

(1)   *The Claim*: Speakers can make assertions by uttering ordinary, unembedded, words and phrases.

To the degree that the Claim really *is* in tension with the primacy of sentences (i.e., the view that (a) only sentences can be used to make assertions and (b) only sentences are meaningful in isolation) this doctrine must also be rejected.

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is an excellent question to which, it seems to us, no one has offered a wholly satisfactory answer. On the other hand, as we have said, in Stainton (1994) we use Relevance Theory to describe, in considerable detail, the process as we conceive it. Barton too (1990) has made significant progress on this question.

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