

## **Fragment answers to questions: a case of inaudible syntax**

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## Abstract

Speakers often answer a question with what appears to be merely a phrase, a fragment of a sentence, rather than with a full sentence. Merchant (2004) offers an analysis of fragment answers in which the new information/answer is fronted to a clause-peripheral position and the remainder of the sentence is not pronounced. Two written acceptability judgment experiments are reported that tested predictions of this analysis. The first, in English, tested the prediction that clausal fragment answers should only be fully acceptable when the clausal answer is introduced by an overt complementizer (What did May deny? That Josh left.). This is because clauses may front only when an overt complementizer is present (That Josh left, May denied, but not \*Josh left, May denied). The second study was conducted in German, a language that does not permit prepositions to be stranded, left behind, when a noun phrase is moved in overt syntactic structures such as questions or topicalizations. Consequently, when the object of a preposition is questioned, only a prepositional phrase fragment answer, not a noun phrase fragment answer, is predicted to be fully acceptable. Both predictions were confirmed. The results support the claim that syntactic structure is present in unpronounced constituents, and tells against theories of syntax that eschew such structures.

## Fragment answers to questions: a case of inaudible syntax

The processing of ellipsis has received considerable attention recently (Arregui et al., 2006, Duffield & Ayumi, 2009, Frazier, 2009, Frazier & Clifton, 1998, 2005, Garnham & Oakhill, 1987, Kertz, 2008, Kim & Runner, 2009, Kobele, 2008, Martin & McElree, 2008, and Tanenhaus & Carlson, 1990 among others). To our knowledge, however, processing ellipsis in answers to questions has not been investigated. The answer to a question often takes the form of a fragment instead of a complete sentence, as illustrated in (1).

(1) Speaker A: What did John eat?

Speaker B: Beans.

Based on a variety of syntactic arguments, Merchant (2004) proposed that fragment answers are derived by fronting the constituent providing the answer, the new information, to a clause-peripheral (focus) position with the remainder of the sentence being elided (not pronounced). On Merchant's analysis, in effect, Speaker B's response to Speaker A really is (2), but Speaker B does not pronounce John ate.

(2) Speaker B: Beans, John ate.

This analysis claims that there is unpronounced syntactic structure ("inaudible syntax") in Speaker B's elliptical response in (1). The goal of this paper is to provide evidence for this part of Merchant's analysis.

It is important to note that Merchant's analysis applies to direct answers, not indirect answers to questions. Following the widely accepted analysis of questions as denoting the set of their answers (Karttunen 1977), direct answers supply a meaning which is an element of the meaning of the question. Indirect answers differ from direct answers in requiring an inference to

establish the relation between question and answer, as illustrated below in presenting the materials used in Experiment 1. While such inferences may narrow down the set of possible answers, they need not be in the answer set (see discussion in Jacobson 2009). Direct answers don't require an inference to determine the relation, they may report the subject's perspective, and they are more likely to be exhaustive (Groenendijk and Stokhof 1984).<sup>1</sup>

Merchant's hypothesis explains a large number of observations. Only constituents can move, as illustrated in (3a), and similarly, answers to questions are generally constituents, as illustrated in (3b).

- (3) a. \*And sour<sub>i</sub>, John likes the sweet \_\_\_\_<sub>i</sub> combo.  
b. Speaker A: Does John like the sweet and spicy combo?  
Speaker B: \*No, and sour.

If a phrase cannot move out of an island in cases of overt movement (as illustrated in (4a)), then the phrase cannot move out of the island to a higher (focus) position either. Consequently it cannot be a fragment answer, as illustrated in (4b) (=Merchant's example (87)).

- (4) a. \*Who does Abby speak the same Balkan language that \_\_ speaks?  
b. Speaker A: Does Abby speak the same Balkan language that *Ben* speaks?  
Speaker B: \*No, *Charlie*.

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<sup>1</sup> As an example of the perspectival differences, compare (ia) and (ib):

- (i) Speaker A: What did John say about Sue?  
Speaker B: a. That her jerk of a husband abandoned her. (direct answer; John is probably the source of the description)  
b. Her jerk of a husband abandoned her. (indirect answer; the speaker is probably the source of the description)

If the object of a preposition cannot move, leaving the preposition behind, in nonelliptical questions, as shown by the contrast between the German examples in (5a, b), then neither can the object of the preposition move to a Focus position stranding the preposition in an elliptical structure. Consequently in such examples a PP fragment answer as in (5c) should be fully acceptable, while an NP fragment answer as in (5d) should be degraded.

- (5) a. Speaker A: Mit wem hat Anna gesprochen?  
*with who(m) has Anna spoken?*
- b. Speaker A: \*Wem hat Anna mit gesprochen?  
*who has Anna with spoken?*
- c. Speaker B: Mit dem Hans. *with the Hans* ('With Hans.')
- d. Speaker B: ?? Dem Hans. *the Hans* ('Hans.')

In the present paper we test two predictions of this approach to fragment answers. In the first study, we test the prediction that in English, complementizers should be required in fragment answers, as in (6a). This is because in non-elliptical versions of these sentences, as in (7), fronting a clause is possible only with an overt complementizer.

- (6) Speaker A: What did John deny?
- Speaker B: a. That he had lied.  
b. \*He had lied.
- (7) a. That he had lied, John denied.  
b. \*He had lied, John denied.

On Merchant's analysis, Speaker B's responses in (6) really are the responses in (7) but the speaker has not spoken John denied. Thus, the reason why (6b) cannot be a fragment answer to

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Speaker A's question is the same reason that (7b) is ungrammatical, namely, because clauses move only when an overt complementizer (that) is present.

### Experiment 1

The first experiment was a written acceptability questionnaire, conducted in English and designed to see whether readers are indeed sensitive to the invisible or unspoken structure posited in Merchant's (2004) analysis. The subjects rated question-answer pairs like (8) and (9) for acceptability on a 5-point scale where 5 = Perfect. If readers are sensitive to the postulated invisible structure required by the required direct fragment answer, they should prefer the fragment answer with the complementizer (8) over the form without the complementizer (9), since the latter would be ungrammatical as a direct answer if the ~~struck-through~~ structure were pronounced (the struck-through text was not included in the materials).

- (8) Speaker A: What did Kylie concede?  
Speaker B: That she took the keys ~~Kylie conceded~~.
- (9) Speaker A: What did Kylie concede?  
Speaker B: She took the keys ~~Kylie conceded~~.

As a control, sentences like (10) and (11) were also rated.

- (10) Speaker A: What do you think Lena did?  
Speaker B: That she wrote some letters. (= 'direct' answer)
- (11) Speaker A: What do you think Lena did?  
Speaker B: She wrote some letters. (= 'indirect' answer)

These controls always contained the matrix clause "What do you think...". As a consequence, they could be answered by either a direct elliptical fragment answer, as in (10), or as an indirect answer without any ellipsis, as in (11). The direct answer in (10) involves ellipsis of material

corresponding to that in the question, namely 'I think'. Since any indirect answer such as (11), also involves a first-person belief report (indirectly, since to assert something is to commit oneself to believing it to be true), both answers provide the same information. In just such cases, therefore, there is no principled reason to prefer the direct answer with the complementizer, (10). However, if readers simply prefer forms with complementizers to forms without, they should prefer the fragment answer in (10) to the full sentence reply in (11) to the same extent as they prefer (8) to (9).

### Method

Sixteen experimental sentences as illustrated in (8) and (9) were constructed with two forms of each, with and without the complementizer that. An additional 16 control sentences, again with two forms of each, as illustrated in (10) and (11) were constructed. All sentences appear in Appendix 1. These pairs of sentences were counterbalanced across two questionnaires so that each participant received just one form of a given experimental or control sentence, but each sentence was tested in one form in one questionnaire. The sentences were combined with 110 sentences of various forms from other experiments plus 6 'catch' trials with clear answers designed to identify subjects who were not attempting to understand the sentences carefully. Each of the 32 experimental sentences was followed by a 5-point acceptability rating scale, which asked "How acceptable was that dialogue" and provided ratings "Terrible, pretty bad, so-so, not so bad, and perfect" associated with numerical ratings 1 to 5. The other sentences in the questionnaire were followed by a similar rating scale or by a question with a two-choice answer.

Forty-eight University of Massachusetts undergraduates were tested in individual half-hour sessions. They received course credit for their participation. The program Linger

(<http://tedlab.mit.edu/~dr/Linger/>) was used to present items and record responses. The session began with instructions presented on the computer terminal, indicating that subjects would read a sentence, press the space bar to indicate completion, and then be asked a question about the sentence. The questions asked of experimental items requested the subject to rate the acceptability of the sentence (where "acceptable" was defined as referring to "a sentence that is an OK sentence you might expect to say or write yourself or to hear some other skilled speaker of English say" with low ratings to be given to sentences that were "nonsensical or ungrammatical or really clumsy"). Subjects were to respond by pressing one of the number keys, 1 to 5. The instruction screen was followed by two practice sentences, and then the 148 sentences in the experiment, presented in individually-randomized orders.

### Results

The data from five participants were eliminated for bad performance on catch items, and data from an additional two participants was eliminated to insure the remaining data came from a counterbalanced set. The means are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean acceptability ratings (and standard deviations) on a scale from 1 to 5 (5 = perfect).

	Complementizer present	Complementizer absent
Experimental items:	4.25 (0.28)	3.73 (0.35)
Control items:	2.58 (0.42)	4.09 (0.28)

As may be seen in Table 1 the experimental items were rated as more acceptable when the complementizer was present than when it was not. By contrast, the control items were rated as

being much more acceptable with the complementizer absent than with the complementizer present. Both main effects and the interaction were significant in separate 2 x 2 analyses of variance with subjects and with items as random effects. The effect of experimental vs. control items yielded  $F(1,47) = 80.94, p < .001$ ;  $F(1,30) = 83.47, p < .001$ . The effect of presence vs. absence of complementizer was similarly significant ( $F(1,47) = 55.18, p < .001$ ;  $F(1,15) = 55.06, p < .001$ ) The interaction was also significant ( $F(1,47) = 169.3, p < .001$ ;  $F(1,30) = 199.65, p < .001$ )

### Discussion

The main prediction that the experimental items would be rated as less acceptable without a complementizer than with one was confirmed. The control items, which presumably reflect the fact that the simpler structure of the indirect answer is preferred to the more complex structure of a direct fragment answer, show that the preference for a complementizer in the experimental items cannot be attributed to some general preference for sentences to contain a complementizer.

We take these results to strongly support a syntactic analysis where a constituent first fronts to a focus position and then the rest of the sentence is not pronounced. This analysis provides an independent explanation for the behavior of the experimental items, while also accounting for a large range of other observations (see Merchant, 2004).

Given that complementizers do not obviously add any lexical semantic meaning to the answers, it is difficult to see how a syntactic theory without inaudible syntax for fragment answers could explain these results. The results support the view that some syntax is inaudible, i.e., there is syntax inside some unpronounced constituents.

### Experiment 2

The second experiment investigated the effect of retaining vs. omitting a preposition in

fragment answers in German. If fragment answers in other languages also involve fronting of the phrase expressing the new information to a focus position, then we expect that language-particular grammatical constraints on the form of fronted constituents to be attested in fragment answers as well. In a language like German, full noun phrase objects of prepositions may not be fronted without the preposition, as seen in the contrast between (12a), with a licit governing preposition accompanying its object noun phrase, and (12b), a failed attempt to leave the governing preposition in situ.

(12) a. Mit der Frau haben sie gesprochen.

*with the woman have they spoken* ('With the woman, they spoke.')

b. \*Der Frau haben sie mit gesprochen.

*the woman have they with spoken*

If elliptical structure is subject to the same constraints that nonelliptical structure is subject to, then we expect the same pattern to emerge in fragment answers to questions involving prepositions. In (13), by hypothesis the prepositional phrase answer with the woman is fronted to a focus position, with the remainder of the sentence elided.

(13) Speaker A: Haben sie mit dem MANN gesprochen?

Speaker B: Nein, mit der FRAU.

'Have they with the man spoken? No, with the woman.'

By contrast, in (14), a mere noun phrase has been fronted, and the effect of this is that the preposition has been stranded (left behind in the unpronounced clause). This predicts that the acceptability of (14) should be lower than the acceptability of (13), tracking the difference between (12a) and (12b).

(14) Speaker A: Haben sie mit dem MANN gesprochen?

Speaker B: ??Nein, der FRAU.

‘Have they with the man spoken? No, the woman.’

### Methods

Sixteen pairs of sentences, one with a prepositional phrase answer as in (13) and one with a noun phrase answer as in (14), were constructed. They appear in Appendix 2. They were combined with 64 other sentence pairs instantiating different kinds of information structural manipulations, as well as a set of 24 control items. Two counterbalanced lists were made, each with half the sentences in each form, and combined in a randomized fashion with the other sentences to yield a total of 104 sentences per list. A seven-point rating scale with labeled endpoints appeared after each sentence ranging from 1 (‘sehr schlecht’, totally infelicitous) to 7 (‘sehr gut’, perfect).

Forty native German speakers, undergraduates at the University of Potsdam, were tested. Participants were handed a booklet containing the 104 items and were asked to carefully read the question-answer pairs before giving their numerical judgment by ticking one of the numbers from 1 to 7. The instruction asked participants to interpret words in CAPITALS as receiving a pitch accent. They were instructed to assess the acceptability of the answer sentence, as well as the appropriateness of the answer given the question, and were presented with two sample items, one each for totally unacceptable and perfectly acceptable answers. Participants were asked to use the full range of the scale in their assessment of the felicity of the question-answer pairs. They received course credit or 4 € for their participation.

### Results

The results are presented in Table 2. As predicted by Merchant's analysis, the PP fragment answers were rated more acceptable than the NP fragment answers (Two tailed t-tests reached

significance for participants,  $t_1(1,39) = 6.35$ ,  $p < .001$ , and for items,  $t_2(1,15) = 5.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Table 2. Mean ratings of acceptability of German fragment answers on 7-pt scale.

(Standard deviations given in parentheses)

PP-fragment answer:	5.99 (1.64)
NP-fragment answer:	4.76 (2.03)

### Discussion

The results follow immediately from the hypothesis that the fragment answer involves a phrase that moves out of a clause which is elided, given that in general, namely in pronounced clauses, prepositions cannot be stranded in German. Indeed, the fact that fragment answers involving prepositional objects should take the form of prepositional phrases, not noun phrases, should be a generalization not just in German but in all languages which do not permit preposition-stranding in overt questions or in the left-dislocation structures that are the hypothesized input structures to the ellipsis found in fragment answers. To our knowledge this prediction is correct, as illustrated in the twelve languages surveyed in Merchant 2004.

### Conclusions

Sentences sometimes have more syntax than is audible. Even in very simple examples, such as the German fragment answers, it appears that a phrase may have more syntax than is apparent just from categorizing the words of the sentence and then joining those words together into a legitimate phrase. Systematically gathered acceptability judgment data show effects predicted by the ‘inaudible syntax hypothesis.’ Note, of course, that the inaudible syntax hypothesis is really just a cover for specific hypotheses that require the postulation of inaudible

syntax, such as Merchant's hypothesis about the structure of fragment answers to questions. The fact that experimental data and linguistic arguments converge is reassuring. It would be disconcerting at best if conclusions based on syntactic argumentation and conclusions based on the results of experimental and processing studies conflicted with each other.

One might wonder whether the inaudible structure in fragment answers might in some sense just be implicit, not computed by the listener, during ordinary conversation. For example, perhaps when replying to a question a speaker might have filled out the fragment answer to make up a complete sentence, and only answers that could have been grammatically fleshed out are permitted. Though this idea is tempting (and indeed was proposed to us in one form, by John MacFarlane), it does not account for the data presented here (though it would account for some connectivity effects, such as those requiring the case of a fragment answer to match the case it would have in the corresponding full sentence). Note that either the answer with an overt complementizer or the answer without could be fleshed out to a complete grammatical sentence. Likewise both the fragment NP and the fragment PP could be fleshed out to a full sentence response in German. So although the 'could be fleshed out' approach may appear attractive, it does not account for the data presented here. We conclude that the inaudible structure in fragment answers is not an artifact of metalinguistic abilities, such as the ability to compare sentences across derivations, but rather it is part of the structure computed during normal language processing.

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## Appendix 1: Materials used in Experiment 1

1 = Merchant's example (94)

A. What are you ashamed of?

That I ignored you.

B. What are you ashamed of?

I ignored you.

2 What did Jane admit to?

A. That she wasted the day.

B. She wasted the day.

3 What is Josh upset about?

A. That he lost his job.

B. He lost his job.

4 What is Mary so happy about?

A. That she won.

B. She won.

5 What is Gore afraid of?

A. That oil prices will go down.

B. Oil prices will go down.

6 What is Tom upset about?

A. That he failed.

B. He failed.

7 What is the gardener screaming about?

A. That the rabbit tore up his garden.

B. The rabbit tore up his garden.

8 What is the babysitter sad about?

A. That the children are mean to each other.

B. The children are mean to each other.

9 What did Greg boast?

A. That he fixed the car.

B. He fixed the car.

10 What did Lou conceal?

A. That he asked Ann out.

B. He asked Ann out.

11 What did Susan confess?

A. That she stole from her roommate.

B. She stole from her roommate.

12 What did Kylie concede?

A. That she took the keys.

B. She took the keys.

13 What did Sam predict?

A. That McCain would win.

B. McCain would win.

14 What did Amy ask?

A. That she be allowed to retake the test.

B. She be allowed to retake the test.

15 What did Jeff deny?

A. That he broke his leg.

B. He broke his leg.

16 What does Ron regret?

A: That he joined the navy.

B: He joined the navy.

*Controls:*

17. What do you think Lena did?

a. That she wrote some letters.

b. She wrote some letters.

18. What do you think Greg did?

a. That he resigned.

b. He resigned.

19. What do you think Pam did?

a. That she lied.

b. She lied.

20. What do you think Kyle did?

a. That he impressed the Dean.

b. He impressed the Dean.

21. What do you think Josh did?

a. That he got an award.

b. He got an award.

22. What do you think Chuck did?

a. That he bought a Porsche.

- b. He bought a Porsche.
23. What do you think Anna did?
- a. That she visited her parents.
  - b. She visited her parents.
24. What do you think Lottie did?
- a. That she fainted at the opera.
  - b. She fainted at the opera.
25. What do you think Greg did?
- a. That he fixed the car.
  - b. He fixed the car.
26. What do you think Lou did?
- a. That he asked Ann out.
  - b. He asked Ann out.
27. What do you think Kate did?
- a. That she went snowboarding.
  - b. She went snowboarding.
28. What do you think Kira did?
- a. That she took a film class.
  - b. She took a film class.
29. What do you think Ben did?
- a. That he got promoted.
  - b. He got promoted.
30. What do you think Jessica did?

a. That she memorized an epic poem.

b. She memorized an epic poem.

31. What do you think Jeff did?

a. That he broke his leg.

b. He broke his leg.

32. What do you think Ron did?

a. That he joined the Navy.

b. He joined the Navy.

#### Appendix 2. Materials used in Experiment 2

1 a Haben sie mit dem MANN gesprochen? \ Nein, mit der FRAU.

b Haben sie mit dem MANN gesprochen? \ Nein, der FRAU.

2 a Sollen wir neben dem FENSTER stehen? \ Nein, neben der TÜR.

b Sollen wir neben dem FENSTER stehen? \ Nein, der TÜR.

3 a Willst du auf den TORHÜTER verzichten? \ Nein, auf den STÜRMER.

b Willst du auf den TORHÜTER verzichten? \ Nein, den STÜRMER.

4 a Wohnt er in der KANTSTRASSE? \ Nein, in der GOETHESTRASSE.

b Wohnt er in der KANTSTRASSE? \ Nein, der GOETHESTRASSE.

5 a Erinnerst dich das an den BRUDER? \ Nein, an den VATER.

b Erinnerst dich das an den BRUDER? \ Nein, den VATER.

6 a Seid ihr mit dem AUTO gekommen? \ Nein, mit dem ZUG.

b Seid ihr mit dem AUTO gekommen? \ Nein, dem ZUG.

7 a Reden sie über den HÄUPTLING? \ Nein, über den MEDIZINMANN.

- b Reden sie über den HÄUPTLING? \\ Nein, den MEDIZINMANN.
- 8 a Demonstriert sie gegen die ATOMKRAFT? \\ Nein, gegen den KRIEG.  
b Demonstriert sie gegen die ATOMKRAFT? \\ Nein, den KRIEG.
- 9 a Haben sie mit einem MANN gesprochen? \\ Nein, mit einer FRAU.  
b Haben sie mit einem MANN gesprochen? \\ Nein, einer FRAU.
- 10 a Wohnt er neben einem SUPERMARKT? \\ Nein, neben einer BÄCKEREI.  
b Wohnt er neben einem SUPERMARKT? \\ Nein, einer BÄCKEREI.
- 11 a Wurde er von einem ARZT untersucht? \\ Nein, von einem KRANKENPFLEGER.  
b Wurde er von einem ARZT untersucht? \\ Nein, einem KRANKENPFLEGER.
- 12 a Hat sie das ohne ein KABEL hinbekommen? \\ Nein, ohne einen STECKER.  
b Hat sie das ohne ein KABEL hinbekommen? \\ Nein, einen STECKER.
- 13 a Sucht sie nach einem SCHREIBBLOCK? \\ Nein, nach einem BLEISTIFT.  
b Sucht sie nach einem SCHREIBBLOCK? \\ Nein, einem BLEISTIFT.
- 14 a Arbeiten sie in einer FABRIK? \\ Nein, in einer WÄSCHEREI.  
b Arbeiten sie in einer FABRIK? \\ Nein, einer WÄSCHEREI.
- 15 a Sitzt sie jetzt bei einem POLIZISTEN? \\ Nein, bei einem JOURNALISTEN.  
b Sitzt sie jetzt bei einem POLIZISTEN? \\ Nein, einem JOURNALISTEN.
- 16 a Waren alle da außer einer LEHRERIN? \\ Nein, außer einer MUTTER.  
b Waren alle da außer einer LEHRERIN? \\ Nein, einer MUTTER.