

Elliptical appendices of relative clauses (EARs)

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Abstract

This investigation is about the observation that certain relative clauses in German show peculiar appendices, involving an obligatory subject gap and lacking syntactic integration. The question raised here is whether these strings should be conceived of as an output of mental grammar or rather as systematic mistakes. This second notion would be plausible if a range of examples is poorly accepted in a controlled setting. Therefore, I conducted an experiment, more precisely: a pseudo response time experiment, based on real instances of the structure. In fact, the examples achieved quite high acceptance rates so that they cannot easily be dismissed as mere mistakes. They might, however, still represent grammatical illusions. It will be argued that they are not, leaving an inner-grammatical status of the structure as the only possibility.

Keywords: ellipsis, relativization, acceptability, response time experiment, illusion

Introduction

This paper is about sentences from German edited texts like (1).

1. Nachrichten, die man schauernd liest
news thatonewith.a.shudder reads
und (*man) dabei dieses unendliche
and (*one) at.the.same.time this infinite
Grauendoch nicht begreifen kann.
horror yet not comprehend can
(KulturSPIEGEL, no. 2/2011, p. 38)
'news that one reads with a shudder and yet cannot comprehend this
infinite horror'

The pronoun *die* (line 1) introduces a relative clause. This relative clause appears to contain a coordinate structure, as suggested by the presence of the conjunction *und* (line 2). However, the immediately following string involves two peculiarities. First, it does not seem possible to realize the subject, which is odd for a language like German (Seiler 2015:244-245). Second, verb last order, more precisely: finite verb last order (*begreifen kann*), usually implies the presence

of an overt subjunction or relativizer – but there is no subjunction, nor can *die* relate to this string as it would act as a second, unselected direct object.

Thus, we observe an obligatory subject gap as well as unlicensed verb last order. These two properties are the defining characteristics of what are called here ELLIPTICAL APPENDICES OF RELATIVE CLAUSES (EARS). Their peculiarity raises the question whether they should be conceived of as an output of mental grammar or rather as systematic mistakes. The following sections try to answer this question by means of an experimental approach.

Testing EARs: inner- or outer-grammatical?

Conceptual issues around acceptability: It is well known that acceptability alone is neither a necessary nor a sufficient criterion for the inner-grammatical status of a given structure. It is not a necessary criterion because there are garden-path structures (– acceptable, + considered grammatical) and it is not a sufficient criterion because there are grammatical illusions (+ acceptable, – considered grammatical; cf. Haider 2011). However, EARS are too peculiar to qualify as garden-paths. This leaves us with two possibilities. Either EARS prove not to be acceptable in a controlled setting, which means that they can be plausibly dismissed as outer-grammatical – or they prove to be acceptable in a controlled setting, which means that their status has to be further discussed: do they derive from grammar or are they illusions?

Another conceptual issue with respect to acceptability is how to access it experimentally. Especially when working on standard varieties, as is the case in the present study, one is faced with the danger that participants will want to showcase what they have learnt at school rather than follow their intuition. The design presented in the following section tries to overcome this problem.

Design: I conducted a pseudo response time experiment. In more detail, the participants were asked to tell apart real German sentences from mock German sentences as quickly as possible. This means that, from the perspective of the participants, accuracy was presupposed while speed was emphasized. In actual fact, however, I was interested in the judgments as such and used time pressure only to enforce spontaneity. Technically, the task was implemented as a matching task with real measurement of response times at SoSci Survey.

As for the stimuli, I used four structural types:

- EARS from a convenience sample (edited genres throughout)
- Instances of asymmetric coordination (AC, cf. Reich 2009)
- Surface structures that can be analysed as deep coordination below the subject (DC1)
- Surface structures that can be analysed as deep coordination below non-subjects (DC 2)

AC is similar to EARs in two respects. First, it involves the (surface) coordination of unlikes, typically V2 + V1. Second, it involves an obligatory subject gap. However, AC is generally considered grammatical and acceptable in the literature. Likewise, DC1 and DC2 represent structures beyond doubt. Thus, the three structures serve as baselines for the acceptability of EARs.

The four structures were tested in four conditions, cf. Table 1.

Table 1: Conditions

	+ conjunction	– conjunction
+ subject		
– subject		

The presence of the subject was varied in order to double-check whether the subject gap is indeed obligatory. The presence of an overt conjunction was varied in order to explore syndesis as a factor for coordination acceptability.

As to the number of stimuli, EARs were represented by five examples in four conditions, the other structures were represented by one example each, again in four conditions. So, in total, there were 32 target items, mixed with filler and control items and presented in rotated order. 121 persons participated in the experiment, of which 103 native speakers remained after the data had been cleaned.

Results

The accumulated results are shown in Figure 1 – Figure 4.

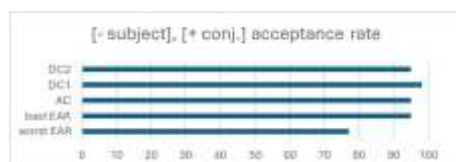


Figure 1: Results for condition [- subject, + conjunction]



Figure 3: Results for condition [+ subject, + conjunction]

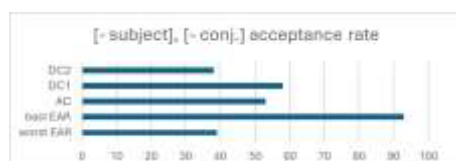


Figure 2: Results for condition [- subject, – conjunction]

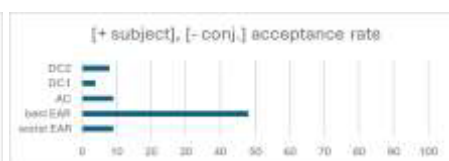


Figure 4: Results for condition [+ subject, – conjunction]

The figures suggest that EARs are not essentially worse than the baseline structures. Even more so, acceptability seems to depend more on the absence of the subject and the presence of a conjunction than on the type of structure.

Discussion

Of the two possibilities outlined on p. , the second one has been confirmed: EARs are sufficiently acceptable to count either as the products of mental grammar *or* as grammatical illusions. One way to decide between these two remaining options is provided by Meinunger's (2023) criterion for illusion status, as I understand it: any phenomenon is an illusion iff capturing it requires fundamental changes in the theory with little gain in empirical adequacy. In particular, an illusion is restricted to a small set of syntactic or semantic contexts.

EARs do not fulfil this criterion. They can be captured by a very general analysis of ellipsis (Reiner in prep.) and even in my small convenience sample they occur in a broad range of contexts: among the relative clauses are restrictive and non-restrictive ones, head-adjacent and dislocated ones; their introductions are simple or involve pied piping; the appendix starts with different conjunctions; the overall readings are symmetric or asymmetric (in a wide sense of the word) and, in addition, I even found the same structure in free relative clauses. Therefore, EARs do not qualify as grammatical illusions.

Conclusion

It was argued that EARs are acceptable without being grammatical illusions. Thus, they must be regarded as products of mental grammar.

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