



# A Note on the Tension between Silent Elements and Lexical Ambiguity, with Special Reference to Inalienable Possession

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Hommage à Yves Roberge : clitiques, éléments nuls, et autres problèmes de syntaxe et d'acquisition

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Article abstract

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# A Note on the Tension between Silent Elements and Lexical Ambiguity, with Special Reference to Inalienable Possession\*

Richard S. Kayne, *New York University*

## Abstract

A number of examples of antecedentless deletion are discussed. In each, the presence of silent elements simplifies the interpretation, in the sense that the interpretive component can now read, in a direct way, more off the syntax than it could have in the absence of those silent elements.

## 1. Subtypes of deletion/silence

Deletion/silence seems to come in (at least) three guises. The most studied is what can be thought of as ‘deletion under identity’,<sup>1</sup> that is, deletion that depends on the presence of an antecedent. Some familiar examples are:

- (1) a. VP-deletion (e.g. *Mary passed the exam but John didn't*)
- b. NP-deletion (e.g. *Three students prefer phonology but four prefer syntax*)
- c. sluicing (e.g. *John is out dancing, but I'm not sure who with*)

In all of these, any lexical item can be contained in the deleted phrase, as long as the requisite identity condition is met with respect to the antecedent.

A second type of deletion, well-known but less systematically studied, is one in which the notion of antecedent relevant in (1) is not relevant at all; typically, very specific lexical items are at issue. The following examples of such antecedentless deletion are mostly taken from Kayne (2005). In each example, the italicized part is what is visible/audible in the language in question;<sup>2</sup> the non-italicized capitalized word (or words) indicates what has arguably been deleted.

- (2) a. *at the age of seven* – YEAR(S)
- b. *Mary is now seven* – AT, AGE, YEAR(S)
- c. *They won the game with two home runs in the seventh* – INNING
- d. *They went home early* – TO<sup>3</sup>
- e. *They don't have much money* – AMOUNT

\* This paper grew out of a talk presented at the Biolinguistic Conference on Interface Asymmetries, NYU, November 12, 2017.

1. For discussion, see Chomsky (1965), and in particular “what is involved in determining legitimacy of deletion is not identity but rather nondistinctness in the sense of distinctive feature theory” (1965: 181); see also much subsequent work by him and by others.
2. This list leaves unaddressed for each example the question of what other languages have the deletion in question.
3. Cf. Collins (2007).

- f. *John is far more intelligent than Bill* – BY (cf. *Mary is by far the smartest*)  
 g. *a little sugar* – BIT  
 h. *The bridge collapsed* – CAUSE (plus a silent non-agentive causer)<sup>4</sup>  
 i. *They have a seven-year old* – CHILD  
 j. *New York* – CITY  
 k. *the Mississippi* – RIVER  
 l. *It must be five below zero* – DEGREE(S)  
 m. *a red car* – COLOR  
 n. *a small car* – SIZE  
 o. *a select few* – PEOPLE  
 p. *John is six three* – FOOT, INCH(ES)  
 q. *We would like you to do it* – FOR  
 r. *a number of books* – GOOD  
 s. *three different wines* – KIND  
 t. *that wide* – MUCH<sup>5</sup>  
 u. *enough wine/people* – MUCH/MANY<sup>6</sup>  
 v. *It's ten after three* – MINUTE, CLOCK  
 w. *They went there* – PLACE<sup>7</sup>  
 x. *never* – TIME  
 y. *We must away* – GO<sup>8</sup>
- (3) a. *Sono le sette* – ORE<sup>9</sup> (Italian)  
       are the seven [HOURS]  
       ‘it's seven o'clock’  
 b. *Una volta vistala, Gianni...* – AVENDO  
       one time [HAVING] seen her, John  
       ‘once he saw her, John...’  
 c. *altro*<sup>10</sup> – THING  
       ‘other [THING]’  
 d. *Cosa?* – CHE  
       ‘[WHAT] thing?’  
 e. *nel 2010* – ANNO  
       ‘in [the YEAR] 2010’

4. Cf. Kayne (2009). Note, in this regard:  
 (i) *The flowers are in the kitchen on purpose.*  
     with, arguably, a silent CAUSE and a silent agent.

5. Cf. Bresnan (1973: 323).

6. Cf. Jackendoff (1977: 152).

7. Cf. Katz and Postal (1964: 133).

8. Cf. van Riemsdijk (2002).

9. Guglielmo Cinque (personal communication) notes that the fuller analysis ‘le ORE sette ORA’ suggested in Kayne (2003, sect. 4) brings out the question why, with singular *una* (‘one’), one can have ‘*le ore una ORA*’, and yet (contrary to Modern Greek) not ‘\**le ORE una ora*’.

10. Guglielmo Cinque (personal communication) notes that Italian *altro* looks like a negative polarity item and that it therefore may be ‘NO *altro* THING’; cf. Kayne (2021).

- (4) *Marie est toute petite* – COMME (cf. *Marie est petite comme tout*) (French)  
 Mary is [LIKE] all small

## 2. Toward characterizing deletion/silence that is not antecedent-based

The challenge is to find a maximally unified theory for deletions of the sort seen in (2)–(4)—and then to ask to what extent the deletions of (2)–(4) can be unified with those of (1). Van Riemsdijk (2003) clearly sets out the task for specified (antecedentless) deletion in these terms:

...a set of more general questions about specified deletion (or specified ellipsis, or specified zero formatives) whose answers will ultimately constitute a theory of such elements...What is the range of elements that can be represented by empty formatives?...What are the ingredients of Licensing Theory? In particular, what counts as a potential licenser and what are the conditions on the syntactic proximity between the licenser and the licensee?... (Van Riemsdijk 2003: 260–261)

Although van Riemsdijk (2003: 261) takes his silent GO (in Swiss German; cf. in part earlier English *We must away*) to be an instance of a non-functional element, let me take light verbs (and light nouns) to be functional elements, in which case we can consider the following restriction as a first approximation:<sup>11</sup>

- (5) Antecedentless deleted/silent elements are limited to the functional part of the lexicon.

The restriction stated in (5) may seem odd for *inning* in (2c) above, since *inning* is, in American English, essentially limited to baseball contexts. However, Jean-Yves Pollock (personal communication) has made an arguably relevant suggestion involving silent PART for the case in (6a), where the idea would be that we have (6b).

- (6) a. *two thirds of the pie*  
 b. *two third PARTs of the pie*

If so, then *two home runs in the seventh* in (2c) might be as follows in (7), with INNING a modifier of PART, with PART directly satisfying (5), and with INNING itself perhaps counting as functional in a baseball context.

- (7) *two home runs in the seventh INNING PART*

Silent INNING is of additional interest when it comes to the question of characterizing licensing conditions for deleted/silent elements (of the antecedentless type). Although the following contrast in (8)–(9) might suggest a right-branch versus left-branch effect, note (10).

- (8) *Our baseball team won the game with two home runs in **the** seventh (inning).*

11. As Guglielmo Cinque (personal communication) notes, this is essentially the same as a proposal made by Wasow (1978: 97).

(9) *Our baseball team won the game with two seventh \*(inning) home runs.*

(10) *Our baseball team won the game with two top of **the** seventh (inning) home runs.*

The contrast between (9) and (10) suggests, instead, that what is at issue is whether or not there is a definite article present that immediately precedes *seventh*, as there is in (10) (and in (8)), but not in (9). If so, there may be a link to the Italian–French contrast seen in:

(11) *Sono **le** sette.* ('are the seven' = (3a) = 'it's seven o'clock')

(12) *Il est sept \*(heures).*<sup>12</sup>

by virtue of which Italian, in the context of the definite article *le* allows silent ORE:

(13) *sono **le** sette* ORE

In contrast, French does not allow silent HEURES in (12), which contains no definite article.

As for the question why the presence of a definite article would make a difference in these cases, it might be that the definite article reflects the presence of an additional phase into the Spec of which *inning* and *ore* can move and become silent in the manner of Kayne (2006).

### 3. Ever silent elements

A third type of deletion/silence involves elements that, unlike those previously discussed, are associated with no phonology elsewhere, that is, elements which are never otherwise pronounced. There are two subcases. In the first, the silent element in question is not pronounced anywhere in the language in question, though it may be pronounced in other languages. In the second subcase, the silent element in question is not pronounced in any language at all.

The first subcase is exemplified by the Topic head that is pronounced in Gungbe but not ever pronounced, though present, in Italian (or English), along the lines of Rizzi (1997).<sup>13</sup> The second subcase, perhaps illustrated by little *n*, makes one wonder if the element in question is well-founded (unless a principled reason can be discovered as to why it remains unpronounced in all languages).

### 4. Inalienable possession with a definite article

Returning to what is central to this paper, namely to antecedentless deletions/silent elements, let us consider sentences involving inalienable possession, in particular those with a definite article apparently in place of a possessive pronoun, as in:

12. The fact that French doesn't allow a definite article here:

(i) \**Il est **les** sept (heures).*

is arguably related via a definiteness effect to the presence of overt expletive *il*. On what definiteness effects might themselves be related to, see Kayne (2019a, 2020).

13. On Topic heads from a partially different perspective, see Kayne (2016, sect. 13).

(14) *The ball hit John in the ankle.*

(There are a wider range of possibilities for such sentences in French and Italian, probably for reasons [having to do with datives and with reflexive clitics] that are at least partly independent of the definite article question.)

In examples such as (14), it is understood, even though there is no visible possessive pronoun, that the ankle in question is John's, i.e. is a part of John's body. It is therefore natural to think in terms of possessor raising or possessor deletion.<sup>14</sup> But that by itself is not sufficient to account for the following contrast:<sup>15</sup>

(15) *The ball hit John in **the** ankle, which is an extremely important part of the human body.*

(16) *The ball hit John in **his** ankle (\*?which is an extremely important part of the human body).*

When the definite article *the* is present, a non-restrictive relative is allowed that has a kind of generic interpretation. This is much less, if at all, possible in the presence of *his*. The generic interpretation of the relative in (15) is evidently, at first glance surprisingly, compatible with our understanding the ankle in question to be one of John's.

My proposal will adopt a familiar sort of idea, namely that (15) contains a deleted/silent *his*.<sup>16</sup> Yet I will crucially take this silent *his* not to be part of the head of the non-restrictive. This is shown for (15) in the following (with capitals again indicating silence/deletion):

(17) *the ball hit John in HIS TOKEN OF the ankle, which is an extremely important part of the human body.*

In (17), the 'head' of the non-restrictive relative is the phrase *the ankle*.<sup>17</sup> There is a silent/deleted *HIS* present in (17), but that *HIS* is the possessor not of pronounced *ankle*, but rather of silent *TOKEN* (or *INSTANCE* or *COPY*, with a possible link to classifiers).<sup>18</sup>

The analysis in (17) provides an account of certain facts having to do with number. Consider the following contrast:

14. Cf. Landau (1999), among many others.

15. Cf. Kayne (1975, chap. 2, note 119).

16. The discussion of inalienable possession in Kayne (1975, sect. 2.15) didn't follow this approach, while prematurely rejecting those of Langacker (1968) and Fillmore (1968, 67ff.).

17. With what would seem to be a non-expletive *the*, contrary, if transposed to French, to Vergnaud and Zubizarreta (1992: 615).

18. On 'token', cf. Vergnaud and Zubizarreta (1992), although the present use of 'token' is more syntactic than theirs, and does not involve lexical ambiguity, or require recourse to L-structure; in particular I take there to be a possessor present (e.g. a statue) even in sentences like:

(i) *Would you mind picking up the arm that's lying on the floor?*

On the long-term question of the choice between *TOKEN*, *INSTANCE* and *COPY* (or perhaps *PLACE* or *LOCATION*, as suggested by Diane Massam (personal communication), cf. Kayne (2014, sect. 14) on the choice between *MEANT*, *EXPECTED* and *SUPPOSED*. On classifiers in European languages, cf. Cinque and Krapova (2007).



(18) *The mosquitoes were biting them on **the** hands/\*heads.*

(19) *The mosquitoes were biting them on **their** hands/heads.*

With the definite article in (18), *hands* is possible but not *heads* (unless one allows for two-headed beings). Whereas in (19), with possessive *their*, plural *heads* is fine (even with one head per person). Given (17), the contrast in (18) reduces to the contrast seen in the following (cf. Vergnaud and Zubizarreta, 1992: 619):

(20) *The hands/\*heads are an extremely important part of the human body.*

This is so as follows. In (18) with *hands*, we have:

(21) *The mosquitoes were biting them on THEIR TOKENS OF the hands.*

This is well-formed, and could be extended with a non-restrictive relative of the sort seen above in (15), yielding the sentence:

(22) *The mosquitoes were biting them on the hands, which are an extremely important part of the human body.*

which is in turn associated with:

(23) *The mosquitoes were biting them on THEIR TOKENS OF the hands, which are an extremely important part of the human body.*

However, the version of (18) with *heads* would correspond to the ill-formed:

(24) *\*The mosquitoes were biting them on THEIR TOKENS OF the heads, which are an extremely important part of the human body.*

whose ill-formedness rests on that of:

(25) *\*The heads are an extremely important part of the human body.*

(As before, strictly speaking, (25) is (irrelevantly) well-formed, but requires that human bodies have more than one head.)

Possible, on the other hand, in contrast to (18), is:

(26) *The mosquitoes were biting them on the head.*

with singular *head*, and with the analysis:

(27) *The mosquitoes were biting them on THEIR TOKEN(S) OF the head.*<sup>19</sup>

The analysis suggested in (17) also provides an account of the restriction concerning adjectives seen in:

(28) *The mosquitoes were biting him on his (sunburned) nose.*

(29) *The mosquitoes were biting him on the (\*sunburned) nose.*

With the definite article, a non-restrictive adjective is not possible,<sup>20</sup> in a way that now reduces to the impossibility of such non-restrictive adjectives in generic sentences of the sort seen in:

(30) *The (\*sunburned) nose is an extremely important part of the human body.*

On the other hand, restrictive adjectives like *left*, *right*, *upper*, *lower* are possible with *the*, as in:

(31) *The mosquitoes bit him on the left arm.*<sup>21</sup>

This can now be seen to be tied to:

(32) *The left arm is an extremely important part of the human body.*

The adjective *left* in (31) need not be stressed. In this respect, (31) contrasts with:

(33) *The mosquitoes bit him on the broken arm.*

where to my ear *broken* must be stressed, suggesting that the use of *the* in (33) is not quite the same as in (31) or (26), as it must not be, given:

(34) *\*The broken arm is an extremely important part of the human body.*

Rather there must be, in a way that remains to be spelled out, a link to:

(35) *The mosquitoes bit him on the arm that was broken/\*left/\*right/\*upper/\*lower.*

and/or to (in a hospital context):

(36) *We'll have to operate on the arm first.*

19. On the question whether or not to take silent TOKEN to be plural, see Kayne (2003) on YEAR(S).

20. Cf. Authier (1988).

21. Diane Massam (personal communication) reminds me of a related question, concerning the proper analysis of indefinite article examples like *The ball hit him in a finger*. I leave this general question for future work, along with that of the relation between *a finger* and *one of his fingers*.

with (33) perhaps not involving TOKEN.

## 5. Ringo

The proposal of the previous section, exemplified in (17), repeated here in (37), elucidates the apparent ambiguity concerning *ankle* found in (38).

(37) *the ball hit John in HIS TOKEN OF the ankle, which is an extremely important part of the human body.*

(38) *The ball hit John in the ankle, which is an important part of the human body.*

Rather than thinking that *ankle* in such sentences is ambiguous in the sense of simultaneously being generic and specific, we can now, following (17) and (37), take *ankle* itself in such sentences to be neither generic nor specific. The generic facet of such sentences depends on the *the* that is present preceding *ankle*, and the specific facet on the silent HIS TOKEN. In effect, if (17) and (37) is on the right track, the apparent ambiguity in question is to be attributed to different parts of the associated syntactic structure.

It may be that a similar approach is called for in sentences of the sort studied by Jackendoff (1992), for example:

(39) *?All of sudden Ringo stumbled and crashed into himself.*

in which *himself* is understood as a statue of Ringo. Jackendoff notes the interesting contrast with the reverse case illustrated in:

(40) *\*Ringo toppled over and fell on himself.*

which is impossible if *Ringo* is the statue and *himself* the person. Sense can arguably be made of this contrast, if we take (39) to contain a silent STATUE/COPY, as in:

(41) *?Ringo stumbled and crashed into THE STATUE/COPY OF himself.*

From this perspective, (40) would be possible only if the following were possible:

(42) *\*THE STATUE/COPY OF Ringo toppled over and fell on himself.*

The key difference is that in (39) and (41) *Ringo* c-commands *himself*, whereas in (40) and (42) *Ringo* does not c-command *himself*. Thus *himself* in (39) meets the demands of Condition A of Binding Theory, whereas *himself* in (40), despite appearances, does not.

## 6. Book

The initially paradoxical character of (38), in which *ankle* seems simultaneously generic and specific, has a partial counterpart in sentences like (43), in which *book* appears to simultaneously be both concrete (in weighing more than two pounds) and abstract (in taking almost a year to write).<sup>22</sup>

(43) *Mary's latest book, which took her almost a year to write, weighs more than two pounds in hardcover.*

In the spirit of the analysis of (38) suggested in (37), we can take (43) to be analyzable as:

(44) A TOKEN/COPY OF *Mary's latest book, which took her almost a year to write, weighs more than two pounds in hardcover.*

In (43) and (44), then, the non-restrictive relative has as its 'head' the phrase *Mary's latest book*. At the same time, the VP headed by *weighs* has as its subject the larger, distinct phrase A TOKEN/COPY OF *Mary's latest book*. The content facet of *book* in (43) is associated with the phrase *Mary's latest book*; the physical object facet, on the other hand, is associated with the distinct phrase A TOKEN/COPY OF *Mary's latest book*. If this proposal is on the right track, then there is no need to attribute ambiguity of the content versus physical object type to the noun *book* itself.

In effect, as in all the antecedentless deletion examples of (2)–(4) above, the presence of silent elements (whose cross-linguistic licensing conditions, needless to say, need to be looked into in much more detail) simplifies the interpretation, in the sense that the interpretive component can now read, in a direct way, more off the syntax than it could have in the absence of those silent elements.

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22. Cf. Chomsky's (1995: 236) less syntactic approach in terms of "semantic properties...of a broad range of nominal expressions, perhaps all". The exact range of the text proposal here, formulated in partially syntactic terms, using TOKEN/COPY, remains to be determined.

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