

Preface

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Ellipsis and Reference Tracking in Japanese

Shigeko Nariyama

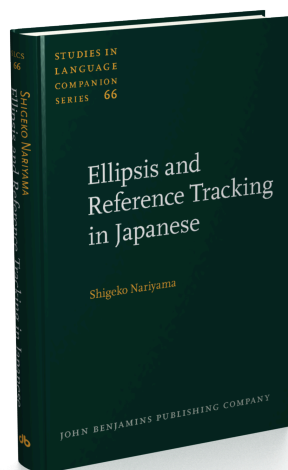
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Preface

As well known among linguists, just as we usually do not think about the functionality of our daily activities, such as how to walk or eat, so it is that when we speak, we do not realize, and are not even conscious of, how our native language works. This is attributed to a large extent to the fact that most of us have intuitively acquired the mechanisms of our native language as children without conscious effort or grammar books, and now we are quite accustomed to this routine and spontaneous activity. However, this seemingly utterly normal phenomenon challenges us to explain why it is that adults learning a language as a second language produce erroneous sentences that we have never imagined possible, and we are puzzled as to why they are ungrammatical, or grammatical but weird. This sort of challenge rarely emerges when we look solely at sentences produced by native speakers of our language.

My interest in ellipsis emerged from such a situation, when I started teaching Japanese to university students whose native language is English. Before long, I realized that few textbooks and grammar books touched on Japanese ellipsis, let alone any practical explanations for it. As a consequence Japanese has come to be known as a vague and illogical language by many. In the meantime, questions from students and my own internal debates kept emerging; ‘How do you know who did what to whom without saying explicitly?’, ‘Why is the referent of the unexpressed subject this, and not that?’, ‘Japanese drops most referents, so why is this sentence ambiguous because the referent is not expressed?’ This led me to investigate the topic as a doctoral thesis at the University of Melbourne, which has since evolved into this book.

In a way, Japanese and English form two extremes with regard to ellipsis, in that English hardly allows ellipsis, whereas Japanese allows it abundantly, which has made the issue of ellipsis all the more puzzling and important for smooth communication. In Japanese conversation, more than 70 per cent of nominal arguments, such as the subject and the object, are unexpressed, and often all we hear of the sentence is a verb.

Ellipsis is in fact a common phenomenon cross-linguistically. Gilligan (1987) reported, based on a sample of 100 languages, that only seven of these do not allow subject ellipsis in finite clauses. Nonetheless, the biggest challenge for unfolding the mechanisms of Japanese ellipsis is posed by the fact that Japanese

ellipsis occurs without familiar agreement features, such as the cross-referencing systems and verbal inflections commonly found in pro-drop languages for referent identification. When I started my research, I had no idea what I would be able to come up with as the solution to this problem. My main driving force was a strong faith and intuition as a linguist that Japanese must contain concrete mechanisms with which to track referents without expressing them overtly. My belief was bolstered by Masayashi Shibatani, who kindly asked me about the area of my research during the LSA Linguistic Institute held at Albuquerque in 1995. He said, “Japanese ellipsis seems ambiguous, but it is not, because there are some profound mechanisms at work. On the contrary, English pronouns can in fact be more ambiguous despite their overt expression.”

My long journey in search of the answer owed much to the help I received from many people along the way. First and foremost, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Nick Evans, my thesis supervisor and friend, who tirelessly supported and encouraged me through many years of work, and has continued to do so to this day. Without his thorough supervision, this work would not have come to fruition. I would also like to sincerely thank the other members of my Ph.D. committee, Peter Austin, Lesley Stirling, and Dominique Estival, for their invaluable input.

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personally inform Megumi and my father of the successful outcome and thank them for their support. I have no doubt, however, that they were looking on from up above and that they knew that the good wishes they had sent me from the USA and Japan were indispensable to my work taking form as this book.

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