snippets

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A partial antecedent

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Normally, we think of deletion as targeting an entire phrase (as in VP Ellipsis) or a single word (as in simple Gapping examples). The following, though, give examples of what we might call a "partial antecedent" :

(1) The food at Burger King is pretty unspectacular. But then again, it isn't supposed to be ~~spectacular~~ / *~~unspectacular~~

(2) Fans of The Three Stooges are unsophisticated. But then again, they never claimed to be ~~sophisticated~~ / *~~unsophisticated~~

(3) Dana's promotion is unlikely. But then again, no one thinks it should be ~~likely~~ / *~~unlikely~~

Note that only parts of the antecedents *unspectacular*, *unsophisticated*, and *unlikely* seem to "copy and delete" in the second clause. This requires a polarity contrast of sorts between the two clauses; loosely put, the negative markers *not*, *never*, and *no one* appear to take the place of the negative prefix *un-*. Without a polarity contrast, we do not find partial antecedents of this type:

(4) The food at Burger King is pretty unspectacular, though admittedly one expects it to be ~~unspectacular~~ / *~~spectacular~~

(5) Fans of The Three Stooges are unsophisticated, and they claim to be ~~unsophisticated~~ / *~~sophisticated~~

Even with a polarity contrast across clauses, though, neither various Class I negative prefixes nor the Class II morpheme *non-* pattern with *un-* in this way:

(6) The puzzles in this book are impossible, but they're really not supposed to be *~~possible~~ / ~~impossible~~

(7) That juggler was particularly maladroit, but nobody thought that he would be *~~adroit~~ / ~~maladroit~~

(8) My syntax students are disenchanted, but I never expected them to be *~~enchanted~~ / ~~disenchanted~~

(9) The workers are noncompliant, but the boss didn't expect them to be *~~compliant~~ / ~~noncompliant~~

So only *un-* appears to allow for a partial antecedent. However, it does not seem to occur when material in addition to the affected adjective attempts to delete (thanks to a *Snippets* reviewer for this observation):

(10) Some say the food at Burger King has become unspectacular, and it really hasn't ~~become unspectacular~~ / *~~become spectacular~~

In sum, then, we have an interesting observation: "copy and delete" can apparently target part of an antecedent. We also have at least two puzzles: why such a phenomenon should require the prefix *un-* rather than any other negative prefix, and why it does not occur when material in addition to the affective adjective deletes.