snippets

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Sprouting tolerates preposition omission

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This snippet offers empirical evidence against the observation, due to Chung (2005), that no preposition-stranding language tolerates preposition omission in sprouting, an elliptical construction where wh-remnants lack overt correlates, as in (1)-(2).

(1) They're jealous but it's unclear of who/*who.
(2) The UN is transforming itself, but into what/*what is unclear.

Chung et al. (2011) argue that this pattern is predicted neither on deletion-based approaches to ellipsis (Ross 1969, Merchant 2001) nor direct-interpretation approaches (Ginzburg and Sag 2000, Culicover and Jackendoff 2005). It, however, follows from a copying approach updating the Chung et al. (1995) proposal. Derivations that Chung et al. (2011) propose must be sensitive to the lexical requirements of the relevant parts of the predicates expressed in the antecedent: the adjective *jealous* (1), and the verb *transform* (2). What is problematic for even this approach is that *which*-NP phrases may appear without prepositions in sprouting.

English data like (3)-(6), collected from the Switchboard corpus and Google, have not been noticed before. Importantly, all the wh-remnants are *which*-NP phrases, not bare wh-phrases (cf. (1)-(2)).

(3) A: I'm a student right now.
   B: **Which university?**

(4) Our grandson just had open heart surgery, but I'm not sure **which hospital**.

(5) A: My neighbor did it [stenciling] first and I've seen her house and I saw how beautiful it looked, so then I decided I was going to do it. It turned out really, really good.
   B: What design did you use?
   A: Mostly flowers.
   B: **Which room?**

(6) I have heard of people being able to check a bag full of scuba gear which was more than the wt limit and not being charged extra, but I don't remember **which airline**.

No current analysis of sprouting predicts a contrast between these two kinds of wh-remnants, nor is it clear how to motivate this contrast, if we only appeal to the lexical requirements of predicates.

To explore the naturalness of these four prepositionless phrases, I collected ratings from forty English speakers via Amazon's Mechanical Turk. For each experimental item, the antecedent was followed by three continuations, arranged in random order. Participants rated the naturalness of each continuation by assigning between 1 and 100

points to it. Across all items, the continuations included a *which*-NP with and without a preposition, and a cleft (see Fig. 1). For example, in (3), they were:

(7) a. At which university?   b. Which university is it?   c. Which university?

Because (7b) could be a cleft source for (7c) on a deletion-based analysis, this design permitted a comparison of the naturalness of both continuations. A mixed-effects regression model of speakers' ratings shows a significant dispreference for clefts with respect to *which*-NP phrases with ($p < 0.001$) and without prepositions ($p < 0.03$), while the latter two differ unreliably ($p = 0.18$).

It is unclear how to account for the unexpected similarity between *which*-NP remnants with and without prepositions, given the current analyses of ellipsis. Further, the dispreference for clefts is particularly problematic for deletion-based approaches.

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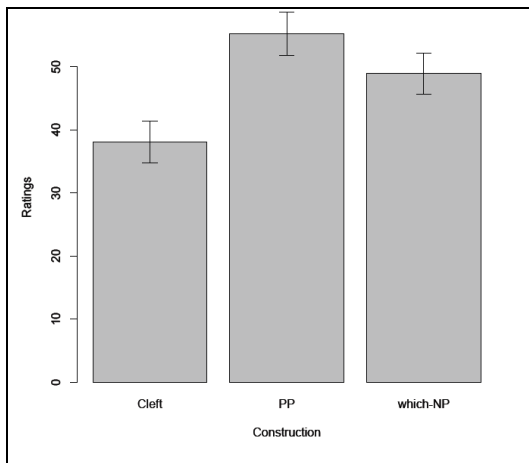
Figure 1: Mean naturalness ratings by construction