

The Answer (in short)
Pauline Jacobson
Brown University

This talk will consider “short” answers to questions, as in the dialogue in (1a-b):

- (1) a. Who left the party at midnight. b. Claribel.

A popular view on this (see, e.g. Morgan, 1973, Merchant 2003) is that (1b) is elliptical for (1c): identical in all respects to (1c) except for its pronunciation:

- c. Claribel left the party at midnight.

This talk will instead defend (with modifications) the position taken in Groendijk and Stokhof (1984) (among many others) that “short” answers are not elliptical. They are not syntactically sentences nor, by themselves, are they semantically propositions. There is, however, a compositional semantic rule relating “question-answer pairs” (hereafter, a Qu/Ans) from a combination of the semantics of (1a) and that of (1b) - the proposition that Claribel left the party at midnight is the end result of this. Unlike G&S however, I will argue that *only* (1b) is a proper linguistic “answer”. (1c) serves the purpose of providing a response, but it is not a true answer in the sense of a linguistic Qu/Ans.

I will first discuss what is at stake here in terms of the hypothesis of direct compositionality and general questions about the organization of the grammar. I will then review some of the main evidence which has been given for the ellipsis account. Much of the debate here is actually a replay (or a pre-play) of analogous debates in the literature concerning specificational sentences. I will be claiming that the kinds of arguments for the ellipsis view (a) depend on a worldview in which certain constraints cannot be stated locally, but this worldview and those assumptions are in any case questionable; (b) depend on syntactic matching restrictions (such as case matching) which can be handled perfectly easily without ellipsis; (c) in fact handling these with ellipsis is problematic - because we know independently that any kind of “identity” condition for ellipsis must be a semantic and not a syntactic one, which fact undermines much of the purported syntactic evidence for ellipsis. In short, the non-ellipsis view is at least as well-equipped to handle some of the “syntactic” facts as is the ellipsis view. Moreover - I will argue that the main apparent advantage of the ellipsis view - that the propositional information (that Claribel left the party) comes “for free” - is illusory. Once one considers what the processor has to do to get this information, one discovers that there is no advantage over the ellipsis view.

Finally, I will present some new arguments for the Qu/Ans non-ellipsis view over the ellipsis view. Consider for example (2a) and the possible responses in (2b) and (2c):

2. a. Which mathematics professor left the party at midnight. b. Jill.
c. Jill left the party at midnight.

(2b) is a “proper” answer and presupposes that Jill is a mathematics professor; (2c) seems like a “best I can do” answer (as it does not commit to whether Jill is a math professor). I show that this contrast follows from the analysis here (combined with the claim that only “short” answers are proper linguistic answers). An attempt to mimic the prediction under the ellipsis analysis runs into problems. Essentially it will require a certain semantic definition of an answer to which the syntax of ellipsis is sensitive, but the requisite definition for the case at hand makes the wrong predictions about where ellipsis is possible. In the non-ellipsis theory defended here, the Ans part of a Qu/Ans is actually defined syntactically and the semantics is predictable from there - and this gives the right results.