**Ellipsis & Voice**

**Sluicing:** a form of ellipsis that targets clauses under interrogative wh-phrases.

(1) a. Joe was murdered, but we don’t know by who.
   b. Someone murdered Joe, but we don’t know who.
   c. Joe was murdered, but we don’t know who.
   d. Someone murdered Joe, but we don’t know who.

This contrasts with cases of VP-ellipsis that tolerate voice mismatches:

(2) This problem should have been looked into, but nobody did.

(Kehler, 2002)

**Syntactic identity theories**

**Central claim:** Ellipsis is grammatical if and only if the elided material is syntactically identical to an antecedent constituent in the linguistic context.

**Merchant (2013):** VP-ellipsis tolerates voice mismatches and sluicing doesn’t because of the position of VoiceP.

**Results**

![Figure 1](image-url)  
**Figure 1:** Schematic representation from Merchant (2013, Fig. 1). Prediction: Ellipsis below VoiceP tolerates voice mismatches, ellipsis above VoiceP is ungrammatical.

**Analysis:** This captures (1) and (2), but the picture is more complicated...

**Methods**

**Goal:** Test acceptability of mismatched sluicing under tough alternation.

**Participants:** 41 native English speakers from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk.

**Stimuli:** 24 items like (6); 2×2×3 design; 48 fillers (2:1 ratio).

![Table 1](image-url)  
**Table 1:** Partial list of types of mismatches are possible under sluicing and VP-ellipsis. Checkmarks in brackets indicate that mismatch occurs outside the elided material.

**Results:**

- 1. No mismatch penalty.
- 2. No overall ellipsis penalty.
- 3. ‘When/where’ items were degraded.
- 4. ‘When/where’ penalty greater under ellipsis.

**Discussion**

Our results indicate that sluicing is insensitive to argument-structure mismatches that result from tough movement.

Such mismatches can be handled by existing “fine-tuning” accounts that relax the identity condition to allow lexical mismatches as long as they have identical indices (e.g. Merchant, 2001; Rudin, 2019):

(7) **Mismatches, are easy to include if you know how to mis-mismatch.**

(Merchant 2001) and Rudin (2019) argue that this revision of the identity condition is required for examples like (8), among others:

(8) **Who did the suspect call?** and when did they call them?

(Kehler, 2001, ex. 112b)

However, those identity approaches are problematic for 3 reasons:

1. **‘Over-fitting’** in the absence of independent motivation, fine-tuning the identity condition to capture specific observations isn’t (by itself) explanatory.
2. **Descriptive adequacy:** Even the latest identity account (Rudin, 2019), which improves on previous attempts by allowing acceptable mismatches like those in (4d), falsely rules out lexical mismatches like the one in (4e).
3. **Can’t explain when/where results:** We found an ellipsis-specific penalty for ‘when’ and ‘where’ variants relative to their ‘how’ counterparts. Since antecedent and elided material are held constant within items, any Identity condition that licenses the ‘how’ variant will also predict the ‘when/where’ variants to be acceptable.

**Final remarks**

The acceptability of non-elliptical items is “mirrored” in the ellipsis condition (see Fig. 3). If this pattern isn’t spurious, it may hint at a “speaker-choice effect”: whatever is causing an elliptical utterance to be degraded could improve the acceptability of non-elliptical alternatives that convey the same meaning and vice versa.

Further research is needed to test this possibility.


