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Inferential Ellipsis Resolution:
Sluicing, Nominal Antecedents, and the QUD

Till Poppels and Andy Kehler
UC San Diego

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What is ellipsis?

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What is ellipsis?

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(1) a.   <u>Someone murdered Joe</u> but we don't know who (murdered him).
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- All languages seem allow some forms of ellipsis, and it is easy to see why:
    - Ellipsis is efficient: speakers get away with reduced utterances while still conveying complex meanings.
    - Helps establish common ground: by eliding material, speakers signal that they take it to be in common ground and topical.

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- Big question: what aspects of the context make ellipsis possible?

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  - Helps establish common ground: by eliding material, speakers signal that they take it to be in common ground and topical.
- Big question: what aspects of the context make ellipsis possible?
- This talk focuses on "sluicing:" ellipsis of clauses that are embedded under interrogative wh-phrases, as shown in (1).

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Theories of ellipsis: Identity theories

(e.g. Chung, 2006, 2013; Merchant, 2001; Rudin, 2019; Sag, 1976)

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Central claim: Material can only be elided if it is identical to its antecedent.

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  - semantic vs. syntactic identity
  - reconstruction vs. deletion

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- Collapsing common distinctions:
    - semantic vs. syntactic identity
    - reconstruction vs. deletion
- Key property for my purposes: Identity theories aim to reduce the effect of the context to the linguistic antecedent

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- Treating ellipsis as discourse reference explains anaphoric properties:
  - cataphoric ellipsis

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  - ellipsis sites triggering "sloppy" readings

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- Linguistic antecedent is important: it introduces the referent.

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- Linguistic antecedent is important: it introduces the referent.
- But so are other factors:
  - World knowledge: e.g. by introducing situationally evoked referents (Poppels & Kehler, 2017)
  - Availability of relevant Question under Discussion (QuD)

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- But so are other factors:
    - World knowledge: e.g. by introducing situationally evoked referents (Poppels & Kehler, 2017)
    - Availability of relevant Question under Discussion (QuD)
- QuD hypothesis: questions can be sluiced iff they correspond to a salient QuD (AnderBois, 2014; Barros, 2014; Ginzburg & Sag, 2000)

Plan for today

Interim summary:

- 2 types of theories:
  - IDENTITY theories: ellipsis depends exclusively on the linguistic antecedent
  - Referential theories: other factors matter, e.g. 'QuD availability'

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This talk: sluicing with nominal antecedents

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This talk: sluicing with nominal antecedents

- Experiment 1: acceptability

- Experiment 2: 'QuD availability'

- Experiment 3: acceptability again

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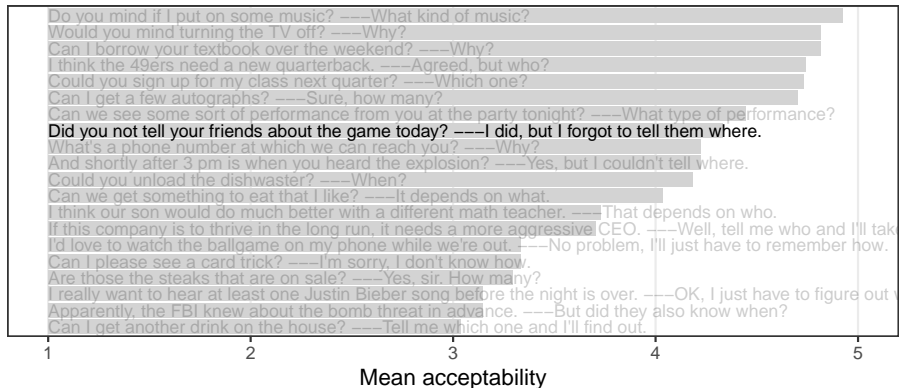# Plan for today

Interim summary:

- 2 types of theories:
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This talk: sluicing with nominal antecedents

- Experiment 1: acceptability
- Experiment 2: 'QuD availability'
- Experiment 3: acceptability again
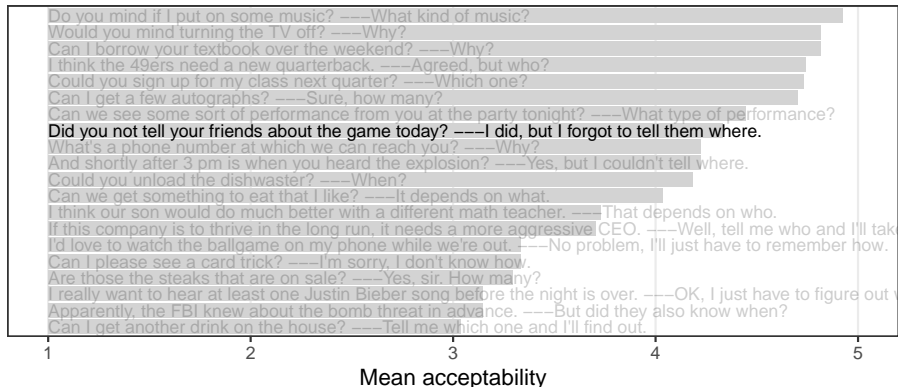- Preview: our results raise novel challenges for both Identity and QuD theories

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Why look at nominal antecedents?

From Poppels and Kehler (2019):

Do you mind if I put on some music? –––What kind of music?
Would you mind turning the TV off? –––Why?
Can I borrow your textbook over the weekend? –––Why?
I think the 49ers need a new quarterback. –––Agreed, but who?
Could you sign up for my class next quarter? –––Which one?
Can I get a few autographs? –––Sure, how many?
Can we see some sort of performance from you at the party tonight? –––What type of performance?
Did you not tell your friends about the game today? –––I did, but I forgot to tell them where.
What's a phone number at which we can reach you? –––Why?
And shortly after 3 pm is when you heard the explosion? –––Yes, but I couldn't tell where.
Could you unload the dishwasher? –––When?
Can we get something to eat that I like? –––It depends on what.
I think our son would do much better with a different math teacher. –––That depends on who.
If this company is to thrive in the long run, it needs a more aggressive CEO. –––Well, tell me who and I'll take
I'd love to watch the ballgame on my phone while we're out. –––No problem, I'll just have to remember how.
Can I please see a card trick? –––I'm sorry, I don't know how.
Are those the steaks that are on sale? –––Yes, sir. How many?
I really want to hear at least one Justin Bieber song before the night is over. –––OK, I just have to figure out
Apparently, the FBI knew about the bomb threat in advance. –––But did they also know when?
Can I get another drink on the house? –––Tell me which one and I'll find out.

Mean acceptability

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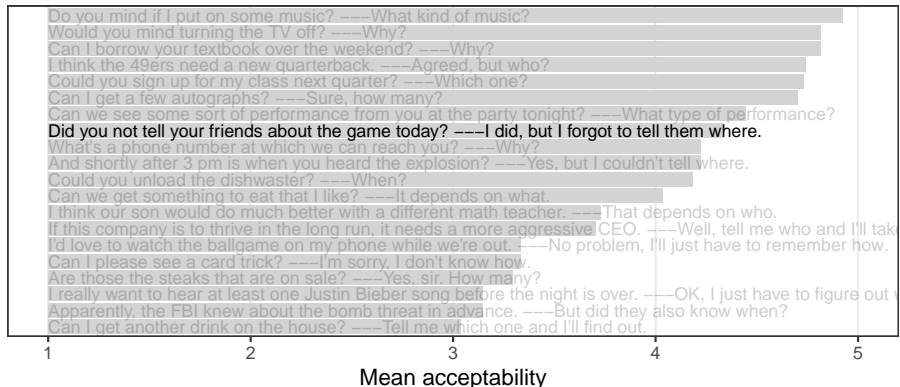References
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Why look at nominal antecedents?

From Poppels and Kehler (2019):

(3) Did you not tell your friends about the <u>game</u> today? —I did, but I forgot to tell them where (the game would be; it would take place; . . .).

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Why look at nominal antecedents?

From Poppels and Kehler (2019):

(3) Did you not tell your friends about the <u>game</u> today? —I did, but I forgot
    to tell them where (the game would be; it would take place; . . .).

Why look at nominal antecedents (cont'd)?

(4) Did you not tell your friends about the <u>game</u> today? —I did, but I forgot
     to tell them where (the game would be; it would take place; ...).

- Represent a challenge for IDENTITY theories: *clauses ≠ nominals*

Why look at nominal antecedents (cont'd)?

(4) Did you not tell your friends about the <u>game</u> today? —I did, but I forgot to tell them where (the game would be; it would take place; . . .).

- Represent a challenge for IDENTITY theories: *clauses ≠ nominals*
- Only previous mention (that I am aware of): Beecher (2007).

Why look at nominal antecedents (cont'd)?

(4) Did you not tell your friends about the <u>game</u> today? —I did, but I forgot to tell them where (the game would be; it would take place; . . .).

- Represent a challenge for IDENTITY theories: *clauses ≠ nominals*
- Only previous mention (that I am aware of): Beecher (2007).
- Nominal-antecedent VP-ellipsis exhibits QUD effects (Miller & Hemforth, 2014):

(5) Mubarak's <u>survival</u> is impossible to predict and, even if he does, his plan to make his son his heir apparent is now in serious jeopardy. [COCA: CBS Evening News]

Expt 1

Goal: measure acceptability of sluices with nominal antecedents like (6):

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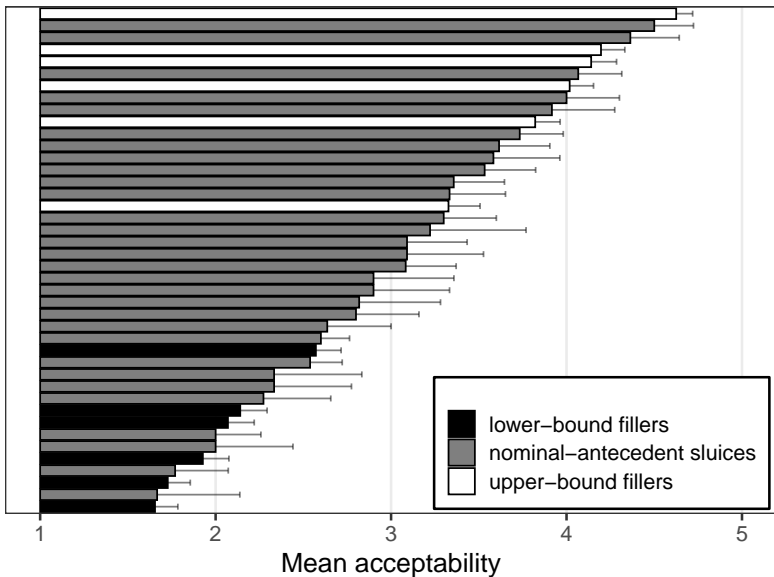00●0000000

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Expt 1

Goal: measure acceptability of sluices with nominal antecedents like (6):

(6) A: I can't see your parents in the audience. Did you not tell them about
your <u>performance</u> today?
B: I did, but I forgot to tell them {when|where|what about|how
long|why}.

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Goal: measure acceptability of sluices with nominal antecedents like (6):

(6) A: I can't see your parents in the audience. Did you not tell them about your <u>performance</u> today?
B: I did, but I forgot to tell them {when|where|what about|how long|why}.

- Strategy:
    - Carefully design contexts to enable 1 nominal-antecedent sluice (caveat: selection bias!)
    - Mechanically substitute other wh-phrases to create variability
    - Test if variability can be explained in terms of 'QuD availability'

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    B: I did, but I forgot to tell them {when|where|what about|how long|why}.

- Strategy:
    - Carefully design contexts to enable 1 nominal-antecedent sluice (caveat: selection bias!)
    - Mechanically substitute other wh-phrases to create variability
    - Test if variability can be explained in terms of 'QuD availability'
- 30 nominal-antecedents sluices like (6): 6 contexts, 5 wh-phrases.
- 63 participants, 12 fillers (2:1 ratio)

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Expt 1: Results

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Expt 2

- Question: can we explain this gradability?

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Expt 2

- **Question**: can we explain this gradability?
- Challenging for IDENTITY theories

Expt 2

- Question: can we explain this gradability?
- Challenging for IDENTITY theories
- QUD theories: sluicing depends on the availability of a relevant Question under Discussion (QUD) (AnderBois, 2014; Barros, 2014; Roberts, 2012)

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Expt 2

- **Question**: can we explain this gradability?
- Challenging for IDENTITY theories
- QUD theories: sluicing depends on the availability of a relevant Question under Discussion (QUD) (AnderBois, 2014; Barros, 2014; Roberts, 2012)
- Plan for Expt 2:
  - Measure predictablity of sluiced question (QUD)
  - Check if this 'QUD availability' measure predicts acceptability

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Expt 2: passage-completion task

(Instructions: carefully read the passage below, carefully read all continuations, and then choose the continuation you find most likely.)

"A: I can't see your parents in the audience. Did you not tell them about your performance today? B: I did, but I forgot to tell them...

1. ...where I was performing."

2. ...how long it would last."

3. ...when it was going to start."

4. ...why they should be in the audience."

5. ...what it was about."

- Answer choices: modal response in separate norming experiment in which participants paraphrased the ellipsis site

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Expt 2: Results

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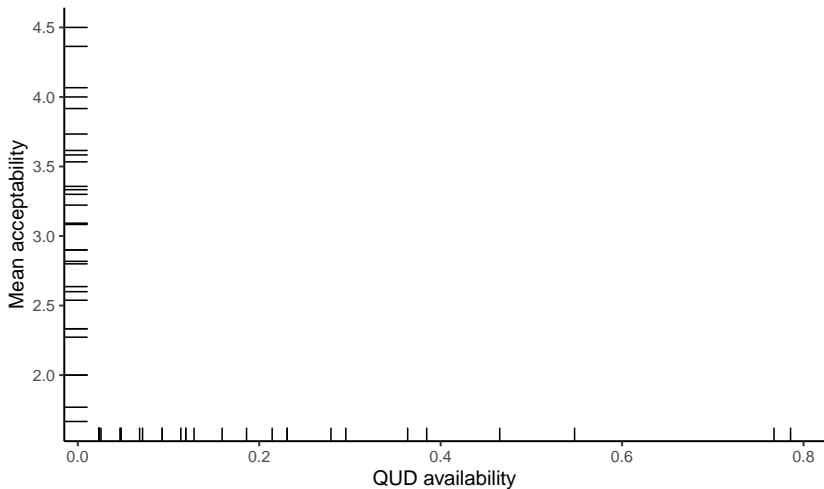
Expt 2: Results
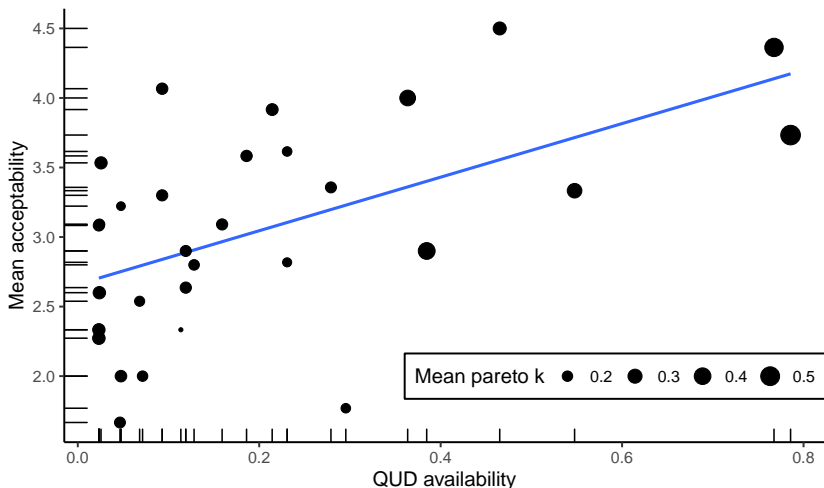
- Frequentist analysis: $\beta = 1.826, p = 0.037$
- Bayesian analysis: $P(\beta > 0) = 0.983$

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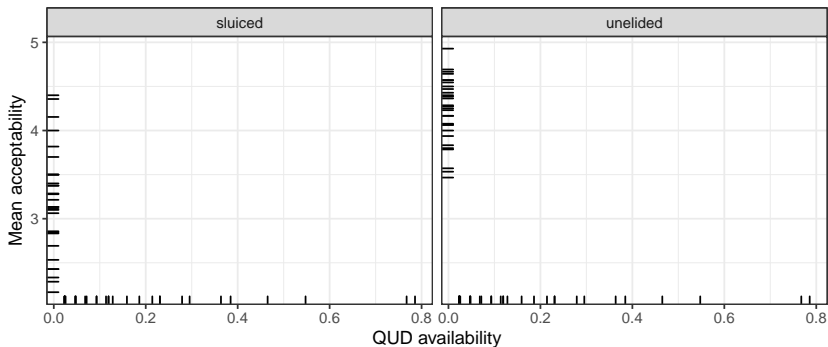3 Expts: Sluicing with nominal antecedents
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Expt 3: revisiting acceptability

Goal: determine if QUD effect is specific to sluicing, by replicating Expt 1 and adding unelided variants (N = 153)

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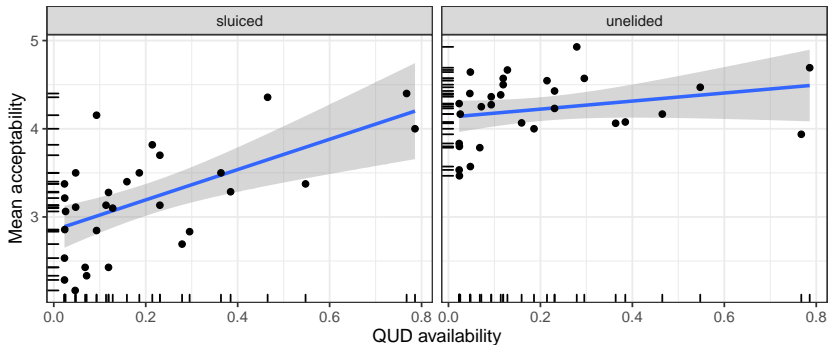

- Replication of QUD effect: $P(\beta > 0) = 0.998$
- Interaction not significant: $P(\beta < 0) = 0.837$
- No evidence that QuD effect is ellipsis-specific!
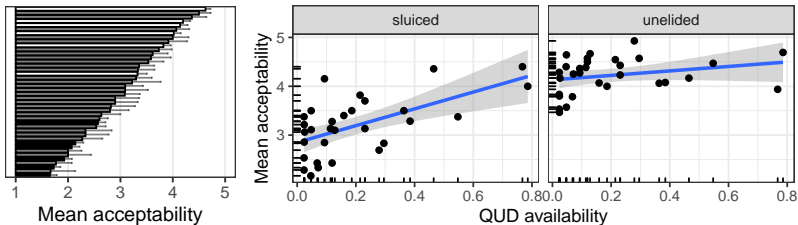
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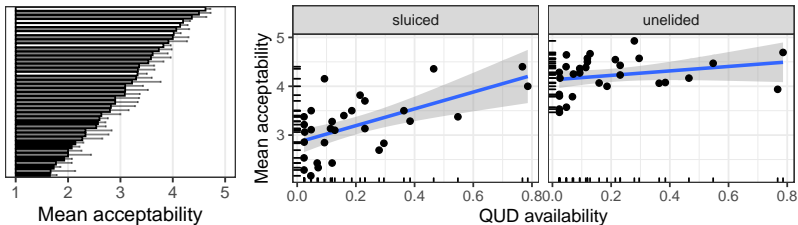References
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Discussion

- Expt 1:
  - Some nominal-antecedent sluices are impeccable, others terrible.
  - This pattern is problematic for Identity theories.
  - Referential theories stand a better chance of explaining variability, since they recognize multiple factors as potentially relevant.

Discussion
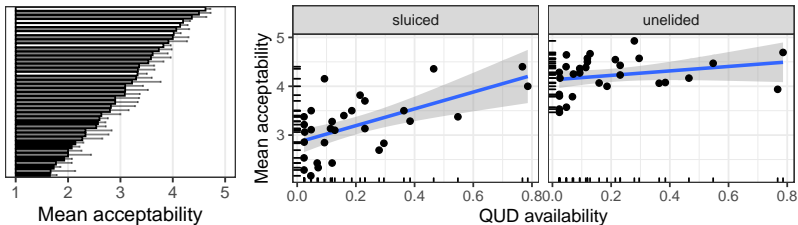
- Expt 1:
  - Some nominal-antecedent sluices are impeccable, others terrible.
  - This pattern is problematic for Identity theories.
  - Referential theories stand a better chance of explaining variability, since they recognize multiple factors as potentially relevant.
- Expts 2 & 3:
  - Some of the variance is due to variation in 'QUD availability'.
  - However, QUD effect is not specific to ellipsis.

Discussion

- Expt 1:
  - Some nominal-antecedent sluices are impeccable, others terrible.
  - This pattern is problematic for Identity theories.
  - Referential theories stand a better chance of explaining variability, since they recognize multiple factors as potentially relevant.
- Expts 2 & 3:
  - Some of the variance is due to variation in 'QUD availability'.
  - However, QUD effect is not specific to ellipsis.
- Bottom line: something beyond predictability is constraining ellipsis.

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Partee's marbles

(7) I dropped 10 marbles and I only found 9 of them. #It must be under the sofa.

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⇒ Even though the missing marble is maximally salient, *it* is infelicitous unless the marble was introduced explicitly.

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Partee's marbles

(7) I dropped 10 marbles and I only found 9 of them. #It must be under the sofa.

⇒ Even though the missing marble is maximally salient, *it* is infelicitous unless the marble was introduced explicitly.

(8) I can't see your parents in the audience, did you not tell them about your performance today? —I did, but I forgot to tell them. . .
   a.   . . . when (the performance was).
   b.   . . . why #(they should be there).

Partee's marbles

(7) I dropped 10 marbles and I only found 9 of them. #It must be under the sofa.

$\Rightarrow$ Even though the missing marble is maximally salient, *it* is infelicitous unless the marble was introduced explicitly.

(8) I can't see your parents in the audience, did you not tell them about your <u>performance</u> today? —I did, but I forgot to tell them. . .
    a.   . . . when (the performance was).
    b.   . . . why #(they should be there).

$\Rightarrow$ Even though a perfectly coherent continuation exists for (8-b), sluicing appears to point us back to the antecedent (i.e., the performance).

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Thank you!

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