

Modal Ellipsis in Najdi Arabic

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Abstract

This paper discusses modal ellipsis in Najdi Arabic (NA) as a case of VP ellipsis. One of the goals of this paper is to show whether or not modal ellipsis exists in NA. It has been argued that modal ellipsis should be considered as a type of VP ellipsis. In VP ellipsis, the main predicate and its arguments are deleted. However, modal ellipsis is obligatorily licensed by a modal, and the complement is deleted. The properties of modal ellipsis show that modal ellipsis allows a sloppy and strict reading, backward anaphora, the antecedent and the ellipsis site to be embedded, and it can appear within an island domain. These facts indicate that this type of ellipsis exhibits the same properties as VP ellipsis. Studies on Arabic dialects have shown that some allow modal ellipsis as a type of VP ellipsis (e.g., Libyan Arabic), while others do not (e.g., Jordanian Arabic). This paper provides evidence that modal ellipsis is analyzed as VP ellipsis in NA. Thus, VP ellipsis where modals are the licensing verbs, as has been found in Libyan Arabic (see Algryani, 2012), can also be found in NA, such as with the modal *gedar* ‘could / was able to’. Arabic only allows V-to-T movement in past tense; therefore, the said modal must be in the past tense so that the modal can raise to T and VP gets deleted.

Keywords: najdi arabic, VP ellipsis, modal ellipsis, V-to-T movement

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1. Introduction

Broadly speaking, ellipsis refers to linguistic structures in which material has gone missing. Different languages display different types of ellipsis, depending on the material that is omitted. Types of ellipsis include gapping, pseudogapping, stripping, sluicing, NP ellipsis, and VP ellipsis, each of which is exemplified below:

- (1) Jack drew a house, and Kate [_{VP} _____] a car. (gapping)
- (2) Jack can draw a house, and Kate can [_{VP} _____] a car. (pseudogapping)
- (3) Jack can draw a house, and Kate [_{TP} _____] too. (stripping)
- (4) Jack drew something, but I do not know what [_{TP} _____]. (sluicing)
- (5) Jack can write two words, and Kate can write three [_{NP} _____]. (NP ellipsis)
- (6) Jack made his bed, and Kate did [_{VP} _____], too. (VP ellipsis)

In VP ellipsis, as in (6), the verb is deleted along with its complement. In general, VP ellipsis may be defined as the process of omitting the verb phrase, including the verb itself, its object, and its adjuncts, if there are any.

Since Sag’s (1976) foundational work, the VP ellipsis has received immense attention in many fundamental publications. The literature on VP ellipsis in English is vast. In English, VP ellipsis is

typically licensed by an overt auxiliary in T that precedes the elided main verb and its internal arguments as in (7):

(7) Sandy likes to play tennis, but Martha doesn't ~~like to play tennis~~.

However, the VP ellipsis is not a universal phenomenon. In Spanish (8), French (9) and Italian (10), the VP ellipsis is not licensed by auxiliaries, as is the case in English (Lobeck, 1995; Busquets, 2006; Dagnac, 2010):

(8) *Susana había leído Guerra y Paz pero Maria no había [e].

Susana has read War and Peace but Maria not has

(López, 1999, p. 265)

(9) *Claudine est une bonne étudiante, et Marie est [e] aussi.

Claudine is a good student and Mary is [e] too

(Lobeck, 1995, p. 142)

(10) *Tom ha visto a Lee ma Maria non ha ____.

Tom has seen (to) Lee but Mary NEG has

(Dagnac, 2010, p. 157)

To the best of my knowledge, the VP ellipsis has not been examined in NA. Thus, this paper will address the syntax of modal ellipsis as a type of VP ellipsis in NA from a generative perspective. It aims to shed light on the constraints or properties that license this type of VP ellipsis, namely modal ellipsis. Studies on other Arabic dialects (e.g., Libyan Arabic) have shown that modal ellipsis is licensed only with the single ability modal *yagdār* 'can / able to' (Algryani, 2012). This paper will examine this ability modal to see if it can license modal ellipsis in NA. Thus, this current paper addresses the question: can modal ellipsis be licensed in NA?

2. Reviewing the literature

Typically, VP ellipsis is licensed when an overt finite auxiliary precedes the deleted lexical verb and its internal arguments, leaving the auxiliary behind. In English, for instance, it has been confirmed that VP ellipsis is only licensed where T is filled with auxiliaries such as *have*, *be*, 'dummy' *do*, infinitive *to*, or a modal (Lobeck, 1995; Johnson, 2001, 2004; Agbayani & Zoerner, 2004):

(11) Noura is sleeping, and Sarah is ____ too.

The sentence in (11) can be interpreted as in (12):

(12) Noura is sleeping, and Sarah is <sleeping> too.

In modal ellipsis, modals license VP ellipsis when T is occupied by a modal and the complement goes missing:

(13) Jack may come to the party, but Kate may not [_{VP}_____].

Before discussing the availability of this type of VP ellipsis, the controversiality of the structure of ellipsis needs to be explained in the subsequent subsection.

2.1. Structure of Ellipsis

The syntax of elliptical constructions is controversial, with linguists taking either structural or non-structural approaches. The non-structural approach declares that the ellipsis site carries meaning without form, indicating that it has no syntactic structure (van Riemsdijk, 1978; Culicover & Jackendoff, 2005). In contrast, the structural approach claims that the elided material has a structure that is unpronounced in the derivation. Among those taking the structural approach, there is disagreement about whether there is

structure during the derivation process, thus PF-deletion, or LF-copying. The former supports the existence of an internal syntactic structure that gets unpronounced at PF (Ross, 1969; Sag, 1976; Merchant, 2001; Lasnik, 2006, 2007; Aelbrecht, 2010; van Craenenbroeck, 2010). The latter argues that the unpronounced material contains lexically null elements that get interpreted by copying at LF (Williams, 1977; Chung et al., 1995; Lobeck, 1995). LF-copying sees ellipsis as a null proform where the antecedent is copied at LF to guarantee that the null category is allocated with the proper interpretation (see Fiengo & May, 1994; Chung et al., 1995; Fortin, 2007).

2.2. Modal Ellipsis

This kind of ellipsis is licensed by modals where the complement of the modal verb is elided, as in the following English example:

(14) Jack can't swim, but Kate can ____.

Busquets and Denis (2001) analyze the modal ellipsis in the French example (15a) as an instance of VP ellipsis. In the Spanish and Italian examples (15b&c), modal ellipsis has been analyzed by Depiante (2001) as an ellipsis site involving a 'null proform' that has no internal syntax. Dagnac (2010), however, has analyzed all of the modal ellipsis cases in (15) as instances of TP ellipsis:

- (15) a. Tom a pu voir Lee, mais Marie n'a pas pu _____. (French)
 b. Tom pudo ver a Lee, pero Maria no pudo _____. (Spanish)
 c. Tom ha potuto veder Lee, ma Maria non ha potuto _____. (Italian)
 Tom can.PST see (to) Lee but Mary NEG can.PST
 'Tom could see Lee but Mary couldn't ____.'

(Dagnac, 2010, p. 158)

2.3. VP Ellipsis in Arabic

Algryani (2012) categorizes modal ellipsis as a type of VP ellipsis in Libyan Arabic (LA). Modal ellipsis in LA, according to Algryani (2012), displays a missing antecedent as in (16), binding effects as in (17), and it allows for extraction in some contexts as in (18). Thus, it is argued that such ellipsis is a gap with an internal syntactic structure that can be considered VP ellipsis at the PF interface.

- (16) anē ma-gdert-š nsəžəl hədəf lakən Omar gder,
 I NEG-could.1S-NEG score.1S goal but Omar could.3MS
 [yisəžəl — hədəf_{-i}] w gal inn-ah_{-i} kan min rigoli.
 score.3MS goal and said.3MS that-it was.3MS from penalty

'I couldn't score a goal, but Omar could [score a goal] and he said that it was from a penalty.'

(Algryani, 2012, p. 108)

The pronoun *-ah* 'it' cannot take the overt *hədəf* 'goal' in the antecedent clause as its antecedent because of its occurrence under the negation scope. For this reason, the pronoun *-ah* should find its antecedent from the null vP.

Modal ellipsis cases, discussed by Algryani (2012), display binding effects. The interpretation of the elliptical site in (17) is 'Omar can hand himself over to the police too'. This straightforward interpretation is compelled by Condition A of the binding theory. Condition A states a reflexive, such as *himself*, is bound locally by its antecedent, in this case *Omar*. A strict reading where 'Omar also can hand Yasin over to the police' is implausible due to violation of the Condition A requirement:

- (17) Yasin yəgdər yissələm nəfssəh l-š-šurta,

Yasin can.3MS hand.3MS over himself to-the-police

w hətta Omar yəgdər [_{vp} yissələm nəfssəh l-š-šurta].

and too Omar can.3MS hand.3MS over himself to-the-police

‘Yasin can hand himself over to the police, and Omar can [hand himself over to the police] too.’

(Algryani, 2012, p. 110)

Algryani (2012) investigates the likelihood of subject and object extractions in modal ellipsis. When extraction is allowed from the ellipsis site, this can be used as an indication that ellipsis involves syntactic structure. Algryani (2012) shows that subject extraction is allowed. The sentence in (18) is an instance of the extraction of the subject outside the vP as evidence that the subject has been moved out of the elliptical site:

- (18) Ali ma-yəgder-š yiži l-lhəfla, lakən Omar yəgder.
Ali NEG-can.3MS-NEG come.3MS to-the-party but Omar can.3MS

‘Ali can’t come to the party, but Omar can.’

(Algryani, 2012, p. 112)

Albukhari (2016) claims that VP ellipsis, where the VP is elided and T remains, is unavailable in Jordanian Arabic (JA). While Algryani (2012) concludes that LA allows VP ellipsis with a single ability modal *yəgder* ‘can’ or ‘able to’, Albukhari (2016), on the other hand, states that this modal cannot license the VP ellipsis in JA:

- (19) *ʕumar b-je-ʔdar je-ʔtari sajja:ra,
Omar Asp-3ms-can.IMP 3ms-buy.IMP car

w hasan kman b-je-ʔdar.

and Hasan too Asp-3ms-can.IMP

‘Omar can buy a car, and Hasan can too.’

(Albukhari, 2016, p. 41)

3. VP ellipsis in Najdi Arabic

VP ellipsis is found in NA but in some restricted contexts. Like other varieties of Arabic, such as Moroccan Arabic (see Kortobi, 2002), the basic auxiliary ‘be’ forms can license VP ellipsis in NA as in (20), however, NA dialect does not license VP ellipsis as in English by the English pro-forms of do or perfective auxiliary have, as licensors of VP ellipsis. The core case of VP ellipsis in this paper, however, is the one licensed by the modal *gedər* ‘could / was able to’ as in (21):

- (20) Mhammad ka:n jəsbah bl-masbah, w Ahmad ka:n ____ baʕad.
Mohammad was swimming in-the-pool, and Ahmad was ____ too

‘Mohammad was swimming in the pool, and Ahmad was too.’

- (21) Mhammad gedər jəsbah bl-masbah, w hətta Ahmad gedər ____.
Mohammad could swim in-the-pool, and too Ahmad could ____

‘Mohammad could swim in the pool, and Ahmad could too.’

The sentence in (21) involves ellipsis in the complement of the modal *gedār* ‘could / was able to’. This structure can hold different diagnoses. It can be an example of VP ellipsis that is English equivalent (Johnson, 2001; Merchant, 2008b), an elliptical site that contains a ‘null-proform’, i.e., no internal syntax (Lobeck, 1995; Depiante, 2001), or a kind of modal ellipsis that deletes a TP constituent as in Dutch (Aelbrecht, 2008), French, Italian, and Spanish (Dagnac, 2010). Following Algryani (2012), I argue that the modal ellipsis in (21) is ellipsis with an internal syntactic structure that can be diagnosed as a VP ellipsis at PF.

3.1. Modal ellipsis: is it VP or TP ellipsis?

The situation regarding using modal verbs in NA is extremely limited, since modality is identified mostly by modal particles and adverbs, such as *jemkən* ‘maybe’ and *lazəm* ‘must’. Yet, the root modal *gedār* ‘could / was able to’ can license deletion of its complement, which appears to be VP ellipsis. The modal and its complement should be addressed to decide whether NA contains VP or TP ellipsis. Modals can be auxiliaries, heads of a modal phrase or lexical verbs. There exist some arguments regarding the claim that the modal *gedār* deals more with lexical verbs. The first argument is that the modal *gedār* is inflected for tense and phi-features (22)-(23). The second argument is that the modal can coincide with an auxiliary, as in (23). Thus, the modal *gedār* can be used as an auxiliary modal verb that takes a *vP* complement.

- (22) *hum* *gdru* *jəʃaddu:n* *al-imtiħa:n* *w* *ħəttə* *ħəna:* *gedrəna:*.
 they.3MP could.3MP pass.3MP the-exam and too we could.1MP
 ‘They could pass the exam, and we could too.’
- (23) *kanu* *jəgdəru:n* *jəʃaddu:n* *al-imtiħa:n* *bas* *ħəna:* *ma-kənnə:*
 were.3MP can.3MP pass.3MP the-exam but we NEG-were.1MP-NEG
nəgdr.
 could.1MP
 ‘They were able to pass the exam, but we were not able to.’

Since it has been identified that the modal *gedār* patterns with lexical verbs, thus, it goes through V-to-T movement as is the case with other lexical verbs. This assumes that the subject is in a derived position in spec *vP* and it moves to spec *TP*, whereas the modal verb raises to *T*. Solid evidence for such claim is that floating quantifiers and their subject DP can be moved to a higher point or the DP can be moved alone, and the quantifier remains in spec *vP* or in-situ. This can be shown in NA, not only due to the word order in (24), (25) and (26), but due to the fact that the subject is in a derived position in spec *vP* and that the modal *gedār* moves to *T*, to a point higher than the quantifier.

- (24) *kəl* *al-bna:t* *gdəru:* *jeruħu:n* *al-mdrəsəħ* *al-ju:m.*
 all the-girls.3FP could.3FP go.3FP the-school the-day
 ‘All the girls could go to the school today.’
- (25) *gdəru:* *kəl* *al-bna:t* *jeruħu:n* *al-mdrəsəħ* *al-ju:m.*
 could.3FP all the-girls.3FP go.3FP the-school the-day
 ‘All the girls could go to the school today.’
- (26) *al-bna:t-i* *gdəru:* *kəl-uħum-i* *jeruħu:n* *al-mdrəsəħ* *al-ju:m.*
 the-girls.3FP could.3FP all-them go.3FP the-school the-day
 ‘The girls could all go to the school today.’

Furthermore, the fact that the complement of the modal *gedār* is not in its infinitive form, but an imperfective form, and the modal itself carries the tense, therefore, the complement of the said modal has to be a *vP*:

- (27) gedər jəru:h al-mdrsəh.
 could.3MS go.3MS the-school
 'He could go to school.'

3.2. Modal ellipsis properties

Following the fact that the modal gedər displays a V-to-T movement that takes a vP complement, this kind of ellipsis does share some properties with VP ellipsis to be considered as such. As VP ellipsis permits a sloppy and strict reading, modal ellipsis can do so. The following sentence can be read as 'Ahmad couldn't swim in Mohammad's pool' or 'Ahmad couldn't swim in his pool':

- (28) Mhammad gedər jəsbah b-masbah-ah, bas Ahmad ma: gedər.
 Mohammad could swim in-pool-his, but Ahmad not could

'Mohammad could swim in his pool, but Ahmad couldn't.'

Furthermore, modal ellipsis permits backward anaphora, which is also attested as a VP ellipsis property:

- (29) liʔnah ma-gedər, hi: ra:hat bəda:ləh lə-l-beit.
 because NEG-could.3MS she went.3FS instead-him to-the-house
 'Because he couldn't, she went to the house instead of him.'

Moreover, it has been known that VP ellipsis is insensitive to locality effects (Sag, 1976; Doron, 1999; Merchant, 2008a), however, modal ellipsis is grammatical within an island domain:

- (30) a. Mhammad gedər jəru:h lə-l-ħafrah?
 Mohammad could.3MS go.3MS to-the-party
 'Could Mohammad go to the party?'
 b. ēh gedər, bas wahəd nšər iša:fa innəh ma:-gedər.
 yes could.3MS but someone spread.3MS rumor that-he NEG-could.3MS
 'Yes, he could, but someone spread a rumor that he couldn't.'

Another property is that, like VP ellipsis, modal ellipsis permits the antecedent and the ellipsis site to be embedded. In the following sentence, the antecedent is in a matrix clause and the ellipsis site appears within a subordinate clause:

- (31) hu: bka: jəfu:z bas ʔššək inn-əh gedər
 he wanted.3MS win.3MS but doubt.1MS that-he could.3MS
 'He wanted to win, but I doubt that he could.'

These properties are evidence that modal ellipsis can be analyzed and considered as a type of VP ellipsis. This VP ellipsis indicates that the elided VP complement has a complete internal structure that is not spelt out at PF. Although Algryani (2012) has concluded that the modal ellipsis licensed by the present tensed modal yəgder 'can' is plausible in LA, recent work by Aoun et al. (2010) claims that present tense in Arabic does not involve V-to-T movement, but only past tense requires such movement. Therefore, it is not compelling evidence that the said modal can license modal ellipsis in the present tense. I conclude that NA exhibits modal ellipsis solely with the modal gedər 'could / was able to' in the past form.

4. Conclusion

This paper discusses modal ellipsis as a case of VP ellipsis found in NA. It shows that modal ellipsis should be treated and analyzed as VP ellipsis, since it involves vP deletion complement, and some other properties. This type of ellipsis is licensed when a modal verb occupies T and the complement gets deleted. In some Arabic dialects (see Algryani, 2012) modal ellipsis is licensed only by the ability modal

yagder ‘can / able to’, linguists of others (see Albukhari, 2016) have argued against the existence of VP ellipsis in those dialects even with the use of the modal *jeʔdar* ‘can / able to’. This paper concludes that this modal can license modal ellipsis in NA under the condition of being in the past tense.

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