ABSTRACT. Fragmentary utterances such as ‘short’ answers and subsentential XPs without linguistic antecedents are proposed to have fully sentential syntactic structures, subject to ellipsis. Ellipsis in these cases is preceded by A′-movement of the fragment to a clause-peripheral position; the combination of movement and ellipsis accounts for a wide range of connectivity and anti-connectivity effects in these structures. Fragment answers furthermore shed light on the nature of islands, and contrast with sluicing in triggering island effects; this is shown to follow from an articulated syntax and the PF theory of islands. Fragments without linguistic antecedents are argued to be compatible with an ellipsis analysis, and do not support direct interpretation approaches to these phenomena.

The situations in (1)–(3) and Ben’s utterances that close them pose a fundamental challenge for standard linguistic theories of the form-meaning relation.

(1) Abby and Ben are at a party. Abby asks Ben about who their mutual friend Beth is bringing as a date by uttering: “Who is Beth bringing?” Ben answers: “Alex.”

(2) Abby and Ben are at a party. Abby sees an unfamiliar man with Beth, a mutual friend of theirs, and turns to Ben with a puzzled look on her face. Ben says: “Some guy she met at the park.”

(3) Abby and Ben are arguing about the origin of products in a new store on their block, with Ben maintaining that the store carries only German products. To settle their debate, they walk into the store together. Ben picks up a lamp at random, upends it, examines the label (which reads Lampenwelt GmbH, Stuttgart), holds the lamp out towards Abby, and proudly proclaims to her: “From Germany! See, I told you!”

In each of the above three situations, a linguistic utterance is preceded by some discourse context, which may (as in (1)) but need not (as in (2) and (3)) include linguistic material. The linguistic utterance in each case has two properties, which, taken together, give us cause for alarm. First, the phonetic signal that each of the above utterances gives rise to corresponds
to the lexical content of a DP (as in (1) and (2)) or a PP (as in (3)) – in short, to a node which is syntactically non-sentential. Second, (1)–(3) have the same conversational function as (4)–(6) respectively; they can be used to advance the purposes of the discourse in the same way as fully sentential utterances – that is, they can have the same propositional content and assertoric force as utterances of what are uncontroversially fully sentential syntactic structures.

(4) Beth is bringing Alex.
(5) He’s some guy she met at the park.
(6) It’s from Germany.

Call linguistic expressions such as those found in (1)–(3) fragments. The question that arises with respects to such fragments, then, is the following: how can we account for the semantically propositional character of what appear to be syntactically less than sentential structures? This question arises, of course, on the usual assumption that syntactically sentential objects like TPs give rise to semantic objects of propositional type which can be used to make assertions, but that syntactic objects like DPs and PPs do not. In other words, does the propositional content of (1)–(3) come from (i) the usual mechanisms (an interpreted syntactic structure, i.e., an LF structure), or (ii) a novel method of generating and interpreting such fragments?

The answer to this question has obvious and fundamental consequences for the architecture of the grammar of human languages. If possibility (i) is correct, the grammar must include a new kind of ellipsis operation, one with properties that appear to be quite distinct from the kinds of ellipses that are, at this point, fairly well understood, such as VP-ellipsis and sluicing. If possibility (ii) is right, then we must allow non-sentential syntactic objects either to be able to denote propositions, or we must allow the non-propositional semantic objects to which they give rise to be able to be used to make assertions (further, under some assumptions, we may also need to propose new ways of building syntactic structures).

Of these two possibilities, it seems clear that the first is a more conservative one, in preserving the usual mapping of syntax and semantics and beyond but in placing the burden on the syntax, in particular on the non-pronunciation of certain syntactic structure. Call the first approach the ellipsis approach; the ellipsis approach has been pursued since the earliest attempts in generative grammar to account for these phenomena (Hankamer 1979; Morgan 1973, 1989; and more recently Stanley 2000; Reich 2002, 2003; Brunetti 2003a, 2003b; Ludlow to appear).