
Comparatives are strongly affected by focus structure

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Comparative constructions as in (1) have many possible syntactic continuations, including bare NPs (a), VP Ellipsis (b), and full clauses (c). This project explores their processing and use by examining the frequency of different comparative structures within the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and conducting experiments on the interpretation preferences of comparative bare NP ellipsis. The corpus data shows that ellipsis structures are much more frequent than full clauses, with bare NP ellipsis most frequent (50% of the data). This suggests that the repetition involved in complete clauses, and the deaccenting that would be needed in the prosody, makes clauses dispreferred compared to structures that retain mostly contrastive information.

- (1) Tasha called Bella more often than...
{a. Sonya / b. Sonya did / c. Sonya called Bella}.

Interestingly, 80% of bare NPs in the corpus contrast with the subject of the previous clause, but bare NPs preferentially contrast with the object in processing (as shown in written and auditory questionnaires). Most theories of comparative ellipsis propose a complete syntactic clause even for bare NP ellipsis (e.g., Lechner 2008), so structural economy should not favor an object contrast. The frequency of subject NP contrasts in the corpus also fails to explain the processing bias. Since overt contrastive accents on the subject (*Tasha*) or object (*Bella*) do strongly affect the preferred interpretation, we suggest that the default expectation of focus on the last argument in the first clause accounts for the object bias in processing. Thus both the syntactic structures produced and the interpretation of ambiguous examples can be partly tied to the prosodic structure of comparatives.