Retrieving fragments

In this presentation, I'll talk about fragments against the background of cue-based sentence processing. Fragments are utterances that look non-sentential, and hence are semantically context-dependent. In (1), three fragments of various length (form the largest to the smallest) are illustrated following the antecedent in A.

(1) A: I don't want to go into that today.
B_1: Go into what?
B_2: Into what?
B_3: What? (intended: What don't you want to go into today?)

Psycholinguistic research on ellipsis has demonstrated that an antecedent for a fragment (and other forms of ellipsis) is retrieved through a mechanism that allows direct access to linguistic representations previously stored in memory (Martin & McElree 2008, 2009, 2011). That is, all extant memory representations are simultaneously evaluated until the target representation is found. We normally think of this target representation as an utterance located within the antecedent that matches the fragment in some way and that is needed to help resolve its semantics, e.g., the PP *into that* in A is the target representation for the B_2-fragment. The question addressed here is how and when speakers manipulate the content of fragments to facilitate the process of locating target representations. We will see experimental and corpus evidence for two kinds of content manipulation: (1) the length, as in example (1), and (2) the morphosyntactic structure. These manipulations are not predicted as accurately by purely syntactic accounts of ellipsis (e.g. Ginzburg and Sag 2000, Merchant 2001), regardless of the theoretical framework adopted, as they are by principles of efficient language processing that govern the grammar's response to processing pressures, as formulated in Hawkins (2004, 2014). I argue, based on this evidence, that the most adequate theory of ellipsis would benefit from incorporating processing principles. Although my focus is on fragments, both in and outside of English, I will also address pseudogapping data from English.

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