An experimental syntax approach to British English *do*-ellipsis

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Speakers of British English may optionally add a nonfinite version of *do* to sentences with an elliptic verb phrase:

(1)   a.   Pete eats cake more often than he should (**do**).
      b.   Amy: D'you think she ate the cake? Bob: No, she could've have (**done**).

British English *do*-ellipsis (BD) displays a more restricted distribution than standard verb phrase ellipsis (VPE). For instance, VPE is permitted in passive-*be* clauses, whereas BD is not (Thoms & Sailor 2018):

(2)   Cake will be eaten, whereas chocolate won't (*do).

BD also appears less tolerant of extraction from the ellipsis site than VPE. For instance, researchers agree that wh-object extraction from the ellipsis site is permitted in VPE but disallowed in BD (Baltin 2007, 2012, Haddican 2007, Aelbrecht 2010, Thoms & Sailor 2018, Lewis 2022):

(3)   I know what she WILL eat and also what she WON'T (*do).

The existence of apparent extraction asymmetries such as (3) have been utilized in the sententialist literature on ellipsis to support a number of far-reaching conceptual claims, including that ellipsis induces phase-like barriers to movement in a derivational model of syntax (Aelbrecht 2010), British *do*-ellipsis tracks and therefore provides independent motivation for variable syntactic reconstruction to phase edges (Thoms & Sailor 2018), and ellipsis is a form of 'full-phase' spell out (Lewis 2022).

All of the acceptability judgment data reported in the BD literature were informally collected. Considering that ellipsis studies consistently report small effect sizes (e.g., Lemke 2021, Cortés Rodríguez 2023), one should be sceptical about the reliability of these data and unsurprised that some BD datapoints, particularly those related to what types of extraction from the ellipsis site are permitted, are contested in the literature (this is major contributing factor to why the above-listed analyses differ so much).

In this talk, I present the results of 8 experimental syntax studies on BD. Among other things, these results show no effects of an interaction between the presence of *do* and extraction from the ellipsis site for any type of syntactic movement, which automatically invalidates almost all prior analyses. The results are compatible with a novel simple analysis, according to which *do* is a low auxiliary that can only select lexical, non-raising verbs. I propose that the degrading effect of *do* in particular syntactic contexts is prosodic in nature, not syntactic.

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