

Ellipsis ≠ ellipsis: Evidence from exceptional inflection in German RNR

Claim. I present a hitherto unnoticed optionality between exceptionally inflected and uninflected determiner remnants of nominal right node raising (NRNR) in German which contrasts with the stark ungrammaticality of uninflected remnants of forward NP-ellipsis (NPE). Since both options in NRNR show properties of ellipsis, none can receive a multidominance analysis. I take this to show that there must be two ways to achieve the effects of NPE: one that generates exceptionally inflected remnants and another that only applies “backwards” and is able to generate both exceptionally inflected but also uninflected NPE-remnants. I suggest that the former involves ellipsis licensing through an [E]-feature (Merchant 2001) while the latter is best described as pruning (Belk et al. 2023).

NP-ellipsis and inflection. In German, the forms of indefinite and possessive determiners in some case-gender configurations vary: They lack any overt inflectional endings when followed by a noun or adjective (such as *mein* in the first conjunct (1)). In the absence of the noun, i.e. in their pronominal use (such as *dein(e)s* in the second conjunct (1)), they take the endings of the strong inflection that would usually appear on a following adjective: *dein-Ø schön-es Haus* ‘your beautiful house’. Following Lobeck (1995), Roehrs (2006), Saab & Lipták (2016) a.o., Murphy (2018) argues that these affixes are stranded by NP-ellipsis (NPE). In the relevant case-gender configurations, they are hosted on a ϕ -head between *n* and D within a complex DP structure. Simplifying somewhat, when *n* is present and adjacent to ϕ , ϕ receives zero-spellout. When *n* is elided, zero-spellout is bled and ϕ is realized as exceptional inflection (EI) attaching to the determiner.

- (1) *Ich renoviere mein Haus und du renovierst dein-s/*dein* (Haus)
 I renovate my house and you renovate your-INFL/your
 ‘I am renovating my house and you’re renovating yours.’

Novel observation. While an uninflected form is disallowed in cases of forward NPE (1), it becomes possible as an additional option in right-node raising constructions (RNR) where the noun is right-node raised from the first conjunct as indicated by “—” (2). The question then is which operation generates uninflected determiners, given that NPE can only generate inflected remnants?

- (2) *Ich renoviere mein/mein-s — und du renovierst dein Haus.*
 I renovate my/my-INFL and you renovate your house
 ‘I am renovating my, and you are renovating your house.’

Duality of RNR. It has recently been argued on the basis of English that RNR can be the result of two distinct structures, (backwards) ellipsis (RNR-E) and multidominance (RNR-MD) (Barros & Vicente 2011, Belk et al. 2023). This is based on the observation that some cases of RNR show characteristics typical of ellipsis –such as morphological mismatches, sloppy identity readings of pronouns, and vehicle change– while others exhibit properties that are incompatible with it, such as cumulative agreement and wide scope readings of quantifiers and relational adjectives like *similar*, *different*, *same*. In addition, Belk et al. (2023) argue that RNR in non-coordinate structures can only be generated by ellipsis. As these diagnostics generally also hold for German (modulo complications with cumulative agreement, cf. Driemel 2024) a straightforward account of the variability observed with RNR and EI in (2) would then be to argue that EI on the remnant diagnoses RNR-E while its absence should indicate RNR-MD.

Puzzle. Crucially, though, while forms with EI generally seem to align with properties of ellipsis as expected, the uninflected forms also do (4). In particular, they surprisingly and robustly allow morphological mismatches (3a), which are unexpected if multidominance is involved, and appear in non-coordinate RNR structures (3b), which only allow RNR-E, but not RNR-MD (Belk et al. 2023). Judgements for wide-scope readings are less robust but also point towards ellipsis, whereas those for sloppy readings and vehicle change show some inter- and intra-speaker as well as cross-example variation.

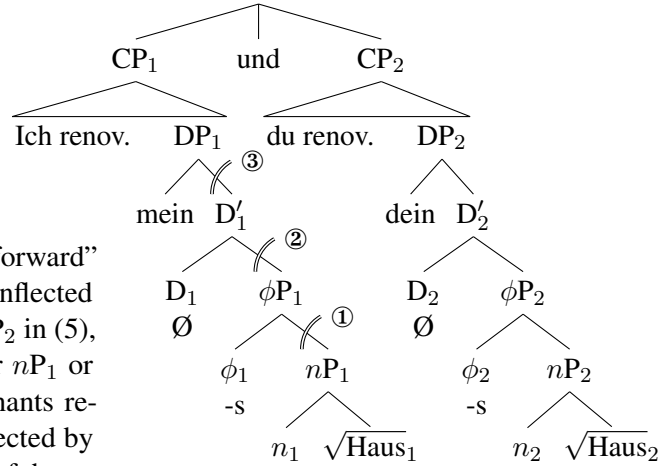
- (3) a. *Ich höre auf mein/mein-s — und du glaubst dein-em Kind.*
 I listen on my/my-INFL and you believe your-INFL child
 ‘I listen to mine and you believe your child.’

- b. *Wir müssen heute noch dein/dein-s* — *durch mein Namensschild ersetzen.*
 we must today still your/your-INFL through my name.tag replace
 ‘We still need to exchange yours with my name tag.’

(4) *Summary of diagnostics for German*

| | infl. | uninfl. | E | MD |
|------------------|-------|---------|---|----|
| mismatches | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ |
| sloppy rdgs. | (✓/✗) | (✓/✗) | ✓ | ✗ |
| vehicle chng. | (✓/✗) | (✓/✗) | ✓ | ✗ |
| non-coord. RNR | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ |
| wide-scope rdgs. | (✗) | (✗) | ✗ | ✓ |

(5) *RNR-E structure of (2)*



Analysis. The core problem is that regular “forward” NPE does not seem to be able to generate uninflected determiner remnants (1), i.e. cannot affect ϕP_2 in (5), whereas “backwards” NPE may affect either nP_1 or ϕP_1 , yielding inflected and uninflected remnants respectively. I suggest that forward NPE is effected by an [E]-feature that licenses (forward) ellipsis of the

complement of its hosting head (Merchant 2001). In German, this feature is restricted to ϕ , explaining the ungrammaticality of uninflected remnants in forward NPE. “Backwards” NPE, however, can also be achieved by a pruning operation as proposed by Belk et al. (2023) that exclusively targets the initial of two parallel structures and may prune a branch if there is a parallel branch in the second structure. This operation can prune nP_1 ①, giving rise to an EI NPE-remnant, or ϕP_1 ②, yielding an uninflected one.

Consequences. In contrast to a determiner, an adjective (like *luftig* in (6a)) that gets stranded by NRNR can never be uninflected (6a). In this case, pruning of ϕP must be prevented by Murphy (2018, 347)’s constraint that adjectives must bear an overt inflectional ending. Uninflectable adjectives, like *sexy*, being lexical exceptions to this constraint, may still appear as remnants of NRNR as expected (6a). Curiously, they may not appear in forward NPE (6b). This falls out as the stranded affix on the ϕ -head in this case cannot find a host but also cannot undergo spellout as an unbounded morpheme, which leads to a crash.

- (6) a. *Du trägst ein sexy/*luftig* — *und ich trage ein hochgeschlossenes Kleid.*
 you wear a sexy/airy and I wear a high-necked dress
 ‘I’m wearing a sexy/light and you’re wearing a high-necked dress.’
 b. **Du trägst ein hochgeschlossenes Kleid und ich trage ein sexy* *(Kleid).*
 you wear a high-necked dress and I wear a sexy
 ‘I’m wearing a high-necked dress and you’re wearing a sexy one.’
 c. *Du hilfst dein-em/*dein* — *und ich helfe mein-em Freund.*
 you help your-INFL/your and I help my-INFL friend
 You’re helping your and I’m helping my friend.

Crucially, an additional restriction of pruning to only full phrases must be adopted in order to prevent pruning of D' ③ in (5). In case-gender configurations where a determiner never shows variation in form depending on the presence or absence of N, inflectional affixes are hosted on D instead of ϕ (Murphy 2018). These determiners never appear uninflected, neither in forward NPE nor in NRNR (6c). If D' could be pruned, we’d expect an uninflected determiner in (6c) to be possible, contrary to fact.

Outlook. Languages with similar exceptional inflection under NPE, like Dutch and Hungarian, show a similar pattern: forward NPE allows inflected remnants only while both inflected and uninflected ones are possible in NRNR contexts. Whether these NRNR-remnants also show properties of ellipsis rather than multidominance is, however, not clear at this point. If so, this would further support a dual approach to ellipsis licensing, where both an [E]-feature and pruning may lead to non-pronunciation.