THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF INCOMPLETE (ELLIPTICAL) CONSTRUCTIONS IN DIALOGIC SPEECH: A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW OF ENGLISH AND UZBEK

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Abstract

The article deals with the theoretical status of incomplete (elliptical) constructions in dialogic speech from a contrastive English–Uzbek perspective. Despite the long research tradition of ellipsis in both Indo-European and Turkic linguistics, a unified functional-semantic model of incomplete constructions that would cover the two typologically distant languages has not yet been elaborated. The paper analyzes the main approaches to the definition of ellipsis in English (structural, transformational, functional-pragmatic) and in Uzbek linguistics (traditions of the Tashkent semantic school, normative grammar, text linguistics), identifies points of convergence and divergence, and proposes a working typology of elliptical phenomena relevant for dialogic discourse. It is argued that in dialogic speech ellipsis is not a deviation from the norm but a systemic mechanism of economy and expressiveness, and that its functional-semantic load is comparable in English and Uzbek, whereas its formal realization is determined by the synthetic-analytic vs. agglutinative typological profiles of the languages. The results provide the conceptual basis for a parallel corpus-syntactic study of incomplete constructions.

Keywords: incomplete construction; ellipsis; dialogic speech; English; Uzbek; functional-semantic approach; contrastive linguistics.

1. Introduction

Dialogue is the primary and most natural form of speech activity. According to statistical estimates obtained from spoken corpora, dialogic forms of communication account for up to 70–80 per cent of everyday speech production [1]. In spontaneous dialogic speech, complete two-member sentences with fully expressed subject and predicate constitute a clear minority: the overwhelming majority of utterances are syntactically incomplete, fragmentary, or formally defective from the standpoint of written-language grammar. At the same time, these formally incomplete constructions are functionally full-valued: they convey the communicative intention of the speaker completely and are perceived by the hearer without any difficulty, since the missing components are easily recovered from the linguistic context, the situation of communication, or the preceding turn of the dialogue partner.

The phenomenon of syntactic incompleteness — ellipsis in the broad sense — has attracted the attention of linguists for more than a century. Classical works on English grammar treated ellipsis as omission of sentence elements that are 'understood' without being expressed (H. Sweet, O. Jespersen, G. Curme) [1; 2; 3]. Structural and generative approaches of the mid-20th century attempted to formalize ellipsis through deletion transformations (Z. Harris, N. Chomsky, R. Lees) [4; 5]. Functional and communicative linguistics of the second half of the century redefined ellipsis as a discourse category directly connected with the cooperative nature of dialogue and the economy principle of speech (M. Halliday, R. Hasan, R. Quirk, S. Greenbaum) [6; 7; 8].

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In Uzbek linguistics, the study of incomplete constructions developed within the framework of the Tashkent semantic school founded by Sh. Rakhmatullaev and continued by A. Nurmonov, H. Kholmuratov, N. Mahmudov and others [9; 10; 11]. These scholars demonstrated that in Uzbek, a language with a developed system of predicative categories and a rich inventory of subjectless constructions, syntactic incompleteness is systemic rather than occasional. Works on Uzbek text linguistics and pragmatics further showed that dialogic speech realizes the potential of incomplete constructions most fully [12; 13].

However, a comparative English–Uzbek analysis of incomplete constructions in dialogic speech remains an understudied field. Typologically, English is an analytic language with a fixed word order, whereas Uzbek is an agglutinative language with a developed suffixation system and relatively free word order; the comparison of how syntactic incompleteness is organized in the two systems promises significant results for both contrastive linguistics and the theory of dialogue.

The aim of the present article is to systematize the theoretical approaches to incomplete constructions in dialogic speech, to establish the functional-semantic status of ellipsis in English and Uzbek, and to formulate the conceptual prerequisites for a parallel corpus-syntactic study. The object of the study is incomplete (elliptical) constructions in English and Uzbek dialogic speech; the subject of the study is their functional-semantic proportionality and typological characteristics.

2. The notion of incomplete construction: definitional problems

Terminological multiplicity reflects the complexity of the phenomenon. In English-language scholarship one finds the terms ellipsis, elliptical sentence, fragment, sentence fragment, reduced construction, minor sentence, and conversational fragment [6; 7; 8; 14]. In Russian and Uzbek linguistic traditions the corresponding terms are nepolnopravil'noe predlozhenie, ellipticheskoe predlozhenie, konstruktsiya s propuskom, nepolnaya konstruktsiya [9; 10].

Three principal approaches to the definition can be distinguished. The first, structural approach defines an elliptical sentence as a sentence lacking one of the main members (subject or predicate) or a secondary member whose absence cannot be explained by the syntactic pattern of the language [9]. Under this approach, the criterion of incompleteness is formal: the construction is compared with a complete two-member model, and the missing element is indicated. The advantage of this approach is operational clarity; its weakness is that it transfers the norm of written monologic speech onto spontaneous dialogue, where formally complete sentences are statistically abnormal.

The second, transformational approach treats elliptical constructions as derived from complete sentences by deletion rules under conditions of recoverability [4; 5]. Although formally elegant, this approach has been criticized for its inability to explain why in many cases no acceptable full source sentence can be reconstructed (e.g., the 'sluicing' type Who by? in English or Uzbek qachon? 'when?' as an independent reply) [14].

The third, functional-semantic approach, which underlies the present research, defines incompleteness as a category of the functional sentence perspective rather than of formal syntax: a construction is incomplete if its full interpretation requires recourse to elements outside its own boundaries, but this 'external' completion does not reduce its communicative self-sufficiency in the situation [6; 11; 12]. From this standpoint, ellipsis is a mechanism of linguistic economy that operates on the basis of the common ground shared by dialogue partners and is licensed by the dialogic context itself.

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We adopt the following working definition: an incomplete construction is a syntactic unit of dialogic speech in which one or more components required by the canonical syntactic model of the language are not expressed, but which retains a full communicative value, the absent components being recoverable from the context, the situation, or the pragmatic presuppositions of communication.

3. Typology of incomplete constructions in dialogic speech

On the basis of the reviewed literature and the authors' pilot observations, the following typology of incomplete constructions is proposed for the parallel study.

3.1. Situational (deictic) ellipsis. The absent components are recovered exclusively from the situation of communication, with no need for a linguistic antecedent. Typical representatives are answers to questions in which only the rheme is expressed, and exclamatory-evaluative fragments:

— When does the train leave? — At six. / Poyezd qachon jo'naydi? — Soat oltida.

— Who broke the window? — Temur. / Kim buzdi oynani? — Temur.

In both languages, this type constitutes the overwhelming majority of incomplete constructions in dialogic speech; the difference lies in the fact that English requires a pronominal or nominal substitute in many slots where Uzbek allows zero realization (cf. English It is cold outside vs. Uzbek tashqarida sovuq, where the subject position is canonically empty in Uzbek).

3.2. Contextual (anaphoric) ellipsis. The omitted component has a linguistic antecedent in the preceding discourse:

I asked him to come, but he wouldn't. / Uni chaqirdim, lekin u kelmadi — (kel-)di.

In English, contextual ellipsis often involves auxiliary verbs (He can swim and I can too) or the verb do; in Uzbek, finite verb ellipsis is licensed more freely due to the agglutinative structure in which person-number markers may attach to secondary parts of the sentence (cf. Uzbek uyga bordim, u esa ishga 'I went home, and he to work', where the finite verb is omitted and recoverable from the parallel structure).

3.3. Structural (syntagmatic) ellipsis. The omission is licensed by a syntactic pattern itself: coordinative constructions, comparative structures, subordinate clauses with a gap (sluicing), etc.:

She sings better than her sister (does). / U singlisidan yaxshi kuylaydi.

Someone called, but I don't know who. / Kimdir qo'ng'iroq qildi, lekin kimligini bilmayman.

3.4. Pragmatic ellipsis. The incompleteness is motivated by the communicative strategy of the speaker: desire for emphasis, emotional compression, or deliberate understatement. This type is characteristic of colloquial and dialectal speech in both languages and is realized through special intonation patterns.

It should be emphasized that the boundary between the types is mobile: a given construction may simultaneously display situational and contextual features. For corpus tagging, the types are therefore treated not as mutually exclusive classes but as prototype categories with fuzzy edges.

4. Functional-semantic status of ellipsis in English and Uzbek

The functional-semantic approach presupposes that each formal phenomenon is correlated with a definite set of communicative functions. Analysis of dialogic material shows that incomplete constructions in both languages perform four basic functions.

First, the economic function: ellipsis reduces the articulatory and processing effort of speech production, which is crucial in the real-time conditions of dialogue. Comparative analysis shows that Uzbek dialogic speech demonstrates a higher degree of economic compression in the verb sphere

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(widespread use of zero copulas in the present tense: u o'qituvchi 'he (is a) teacher'), whereas English compensates for the obligatory expression of the finite verb by means of pro-forms (one, do, so, not).

Second, the rhematic (thematic-rhematic) function: the incomplete construction allows the speaker to foreground the informative core of the message and background the given information. In both languages, the answer to a question typically contains only the rheme; the theme is deleted. This functional-semantic proportionality of incomplete constructions constitutes, in our view, the central object of parallel analysis: formally different languages display a striking functional isomorphism in the organization of dialogic incompleteness.

Third, the expressive-emotional function: ellipsis intensifies the emotional coloring of the utterance, creating an effect of immediacy, abruptness, or emphasis. In Uzbek, this function is closely connected with the category of modality expressed by particles (ku, e, chi), which may accompany incomplete constructions; in English, it is connected with prosodic means.

Fourth, the phatic and politeness function: conventionalized incomplete formulas (greetings, farewells, discourse markers) maintain the contact between dialogue partners. Comparison shows that English relies on a rich inventory of such formulas (Morning! See you! Cheers!), while Uzbek relies more on the combination of incomplete constructions with modal particles (Xayr! Salomat bo'ling! [14; 15].

5. Dialogic speech as the environment of ellipsis

Dialogue possesses a number of specific features that jointly create favorable conditions for the functioning of incomplete constructions: (1) the presence of a direct addressee, which allows the speaker to rely on shared knowledge; (2) turn-taking organization, in which the utterance of one partner serves as the immediate context of the next; (3) the spontaneous, unprepared character of speech; (4) the active role of paralinguistic and extralinguistic means (gesture, mimicry, situation); (5) the predominance of the oral form and the corresponding syntactic simplification [8; 12].

An important theoretical premise is the distinction between the 'syntactic completeness' of a construction and its 'communicative completeness' (pragmatic self-sufficiency). A formally complete sentence may be communicatively inadequate in dialogue (e.g., a mechanical repetition of a question), whereas a formally incomplete fragment may be fully adequate. This distinction, going back to the works of N. Chomsky on appropriateness and developed in functional linguistics and pragmatics, justifies treating incomplete constructions as a norm of dialogic speech rather than a deviation [5; 8].

Furthermore, dialogue realizes the principle of economy formulated as a general law of linguistic behavior: given the shared context, maximally economical forms are preferred provided that communicative goals are achieved. Incomplete constructions are the principal grammatical mechanism implementing this principle in syntax [6; 13].

6. Conclusion

The theoretical analysis allows us to draw the following conclusions. Incomplete (elliptical) constructions constitute a systemic, norm-governed phenomenon of dialogic speech in both English and Uzbek, not a random deviation. The functional-semantic approach, which defines incompleteness in terms of recoverability and communicative self-sufficiency, is the most adequate for the comparative study, since it abstracts from the typologically different formal means of the two languages.

A four-type typology (situational, contextual, structural, pragmatic ellipsis) has been proposed, whose categories are suitable for parallel corpus annotation. Incomplete constructions in English and Uzbek display functional-semantic proportionality: they perform the same set of communicative

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functions (economic, rhematic, expressive-emotional, phatic), while differing in formal realization due to the analytic vs. agglutinative typological profiles of the languages.

The obtained theoretical results form the basis for the subsequent stage of the research — a parallel corpus-syntactic analysis of incomplete constructions, including material from regional dialects of English and Uzbek. At that stage, the dialectal dimension is expected to reveal the interaction of universal dialogic mechanisms with areal and dialect-specific features, which is essential for elaborating a comprehensive model of dialogic syntax.

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