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# The linguistic lexicon

## Ellipsis

refers to the omission of certain words or phrases, particularly in repeated structures, where the item omitted is entirely predictable ('recoverable') from the co-text. Thus, the verb in the second clause of the sentence *Seamus ate a plum and Judith an apple* can be missed out because it is clear that it is the same as the verb in the first clause ('ate'). Ellipsis can happen at the phrasal level too, so that, for example, the coordinated noun phrase *my blue coat and hat* would normally be taken to mean that both the coat and the hat were blue, though the adjective only appears once. Theoretically, of course, it is ambiguous between the elided version, which is a summary of *my blue coat and my blue hat* and the unelided version in which 'my blue coat' is one item and 'my hat' is another (with no colour specified). Grammars of the language are expected to be able to explain these 'surface' ambiguities and usually do so by hypothesising a 'deeper' level of structure in which the ambiguity is erased. Note in this case that the possessive determiner ('my') does not recur either, but this ellipsis is the only possible interpretation of the phrase, where the possession of both items can be made explicit ('my coat and my hat') but the elision of the second determiner (*my coat and hat*) is not ambiguous and cannot mean 'my coat and someone's hat'.

## Embedding

is a term often used by grammarians about the levels of structure where phrases and clauses are positioned within other phrases and clauses. Embedding, therefore, can also be called 'subordination' as in 'subordinate clause'. However, it can be a more helpful, general term which refers to smaller embedded items. So, the noun phrase 'car seat', which can perform a normal clausal function such as subject (*My car seat is broken*), may also appear as a modifier before a different noun and therefore be classed as 'embedded' within the larger noun phrase, as in *My fluffy car seat cover*. In this case, the possessive determiner (my) refers not to the seat itself, but the cover. Thus, the whole noun phrase car seat is at what is often called a 'lower' level of grammatical structure.

## Embedded clauses

take a number of different forms, including those that entirely replace one of the 'higher level' clause elements, such as the subject: 'Swimming in cold water is not a pleasant experience.' Here, the subject of the verb 'is' consists of the clause *swimming in cold water*, which is made up in turn of a verb (*swimming*) and an adverbial prepositional phrase ('in cold water'). Together, even though they make up a clause, they perform the role of a noun in the higher level sentence, which can be proved by replacing the whole embedded clause with a pronoun: *It is not a pleasant experience*.

## Other embedded clauses

take the role of other clause elements in the higher structure but in the case of relative clauses, they form only part of a clause element in noun phrases, as they postmodify (or qualify) the head noun: *your son, who I saw in the pub last week*. This ability for language structures to be embedded within each other is known as recursivity, and it allows for structures to become long and complex with no absolute limit on the levels of embedding that are possible, beyond the human capacity for comprehension. Children's stories are often based on recursive structures of this kind. One famous example is 'The House that Jack Built' which produces a new focal item in the sentence each time, and backgrounds the previous information into a string of relative clauses which grows by one on each repetition: *This is the cat that caught the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built*.

## Endophoric and exophoric reference

refer to the two different ways in which human language can 'refer'. On the one hand, language does make some contact with the non-linguistic ('real') world, so that there is a link between, for example, the word 'car' and the kinds of things in the world that we would feel comfortable calling a 'car'. This is known as an exophoric reference, which draws on the idea that language is (mostly) a closed system of internally structured communication, so that any links outside that system (ex- implies outside) will be distinct from the relationships that items in linguistic texts may have with each other. In the case of the word 'car', then, its exophoric reference may be all the things in the world that we might call a 'car'. Its endophoric reference, on the other hand, would be seen in the context of other linguistic structures, as in the following passage:

There was **a blue car** coming in the other direction. **The car** was carrying a large surf board on its roof, which looked as though it might fall off at any moment. **It** was not going to stop, though I flashed my lights at **it**. **The blue car** screeched to a halt just as the surf board slid onto the road beside my door.

Here, the five references to the same vehicle are highlighted. In the first instance, as we have not yet 'met' the car in the story, it is preceded by an indefinite article (a). The second instance uses what is known as anaphoric reference (see issue one) to refer backwards to the earlier mention, using the definite article to indicate familiarity (not just any car, the car). The third and fourth mentions could also be seen as anaphoric, but it is not immediately clear whether 'it' refers to the car or the surfboard. You could see 'it' in these cases, therefore, as having cataphoric reference which indicates that it refers forwards in the text rather than backwards. The final mention of the car completes the reference of 'it' by making the referent very clearly 'the blue car'.

## Epistemic modality

refers to the use of certain words and phrases to indicate the speaker's certainty or uncertainty about the events and actions being referred to in the clause. There are modal verbs in English ('may', 'might', 'can' etc.) which are the most obvious way to produce the epistemic effect, but similar effects can be produced by adjectives ('possible', 'certain', 'likely') and adverbs ('possibly', 'certainly', 'definitely') or even by body language (doubt might be shown by a shrug for example). Non-modal utterances are known as 'categorical' utterances and they can be much more persuasive (*John broke the window*) than modalised utterances where even certainty (*It was definitely John that broke the window*) can draw attention to the fact that it is the speaker's opinion and by doing so undermine the confidence of the assertion. Small children (and adults too) often forget this when they are trying hard to persuade others (*It really really wasn't me*).

## Epiglottis

is the flap of cartilage which sits at the base of the tongue and covers the entrance to the glottis (where the vocal cords are). It deflects food down the oesophagus and into the intestine. It prevents us from choking by stopping food from being able to go down the trachea (windpipe). When food 'goes down the wrong way', it is because some particles of food have managed to get past the epiglottis.