Sluicing in dialogue: at the syntax/semantics/pragmatics interface

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“Sluicing” is a form of ellipsis that is cross-linguistically highly prevalent and has received a lot of attention in linguistics since Ross (1969). Sluicing is most commonly considered intrasententially, as in *John wants to borrow my textbook, but he didn’t say which one he wants to borrow.* However, sluicing is by no means restricted to intrasential contexts: *Can I borrow your textbook?—Which one do you want to borrow?* is a perfectly acceptable exchange in which the second speaker uses a sluice to clarify some aspect of the antecedent clause. While this observation itself is not novel, I will argue that sluicing in dialogue contexts exhibits two properties that pose a challenge to existing theories of sluicing and have to my knowledge gone unnoticed to date.

First, while virtually all existing theories of sluicing aim to reduce its context-sensitivity to the syntactic and semantic content of some previous clause (the antecedent clause), sluices in dialogue contexts appear to show sensitivity to speech acts and their pre-conditions. For example, the elided material in the above example makes reference to a ‘wanting-to-borrow’ eventuality, which is not given explicitly by the linguistic context, but since wanting to borrow something is a known pre-condition for the request to borrow it, that meaning is nonetheless available as a target for sluicing. Second, I will argue that sluices used in dialogue provide critical evidence with respect to so-called “case connectivity effects:” Case marking of the wh-phrase left behind by sluicing is famously restricted to the case the elided material assigns it. While this is widely regarded the strongest piece of evidence for the presence of (unpronounced) syntactic structure at the ellipsis site, I will present a case of sluicing in German that cannot be explained in this way. In particular, I show that contexts analogous to the textbook example mentioned above can be shown to give rise to the seemingly paradoxical situation, in which sluicing requires a different case assignment than any overt utterance that expresses the same meaning. This observation, I argue, calls into question the evidential status of case connectivity effects in a way that could not have been discovered from intrasential sluicing alone.

References