

The syntax of sluicing-like constructions in English*

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1. Introduction

Sluicing is exemplified in example (1), which has been adapted from Ross 1969. Everything but the *wh*-constituent of an embedded question is omitted on the promise of recoverability.

- (1) He is writing something, but you can't imagine **what** \langle IP ~~he is writing x~~ \rangle

An influential analysis of sluicing—and arguably the standard analysis—is the Move-and-Delete approach (Ross 1969, Merchant 2001). The proposal, also illustrated by (1), is that expected \bar{A} -movement extracts the *wh*-remnant from an elided clausal constituent.

Research on sluicing has also identified sluicing-like constructions (SLCs). This term generally refers to constructions that resemble sluicing but which appear in *wh*-in-situ languages.¹ Investigations into SLCs have largely been concerned with the derivation of the *wh*-remnant. Among the proposals that have found representatives in the literature are proposals that the *wh*-remnant undergoes scrambling or focus-driven movement as part of the usual Move-and-Delete analysis, that ellipsis targets an underlying (pseudo)cleft construction, and that ellipsis of a non-constituent spares the in-situ *wh*-constituent.

We will enter this discussion here, but do so from the perspective of English, a canonical *wh*-fronting language. Section 2 introduces English SLCs in the form of utterances like the one from speaker B in (2i). This example receives an interpretation comparable to the unreduced response that is presented in (2ii), where the *wh*-constituent appears in-situ.

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¹See Merchant and Simpson 2012 and Gribanova and Manetta 2016 for a cross-linguistic sample of the literature on SLCs.

- (2) A: So, I think Anne invited someone.
 B: Yeah, and you think $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{i. } \backslash\mathbf{who} \\ \text{ii. } \text{she invited } \backslash\mathbf{who} \\ \text{iii. } *\mathbf{who} \text{ she invited} \end{array} \right\} ?$

Despite resembling a sluicing configuration, the *wh*-remnant in (2i) appears in an environment that is well-known to not permit *wh*-fronting; see (2iii). Thus, we are faced with the question of whether the *wh*-remnant is generated via a Move-and-Delete derivation or if these data motivate an analysis that relies, perhaps, on neither movement nor ellipsis.

The fact that *wh*-fronting is otherwise not permitted in this syntactic environment rightly attracts skepticism regarding what might be seen as stipulated exceptional movement in the context of ellipsis (e.g., Valmala 2007, Ott and Struckmeier 2018). Regardless, I will demonstrate that such an analysis finds support from standard diagnostics, which are presented in section 3 and link the ex-situ bare *wh*-remnant to elided syntactic material.

In section 4, I argue in favor of a particular conception the Move-and-Delete approach that avoids postulating exceptional ellipsis-licensed movement. I argue that phonologically in-situ single *wh*-constituents undergo covert partial *wh*-scrambling (e.g., Kotek 2019, Abels and Dayal 2022). Just like genuine sluicing, then, syntactic movement of the remnant in (3a) is independently licensed.

- (3) a. ... and [CP you think [CP <who> she invited **who**]] ?
 b. ... and [CP you think [CP **who** <IP she invited <who> >]] ?
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In the context of ellipsis, this otherwise covert movement is pronounced in an exceptionally high position (Richards 1997, Temmerman 2013, Gribanova and Manetta 2016, Abels and Dayal 2022; cf. Abe 2015). Thus, what is exceptionally licensed under ellipsis in (3b) is not the movement of the *wh*-remnant, but its pronunciation in a derived position. In section 5, we will see that standard indicators of movement, including island-sensitivity and intervention effects, converge on the conclusion that the *wh*-remnant in English SLCs in fact undergoes syntactic movement. The paper concludes with section 6.

2. The puzzle of sluicing-like constructions in English

The idea to be pursued is ultimately that English SLCs are a species of bare remnant ellipsis that arise from *wh*-in-situ constructions. In anticipation of the discussion to come, it will be useful to first establish some background on English *wh*-in-situ constructions.

2.1 Background on *wh*-in-situ in English

Despite being considered a canonical *wh*-fronting language, English has several semantico-pragmatically and prosodically distinguished *wh*-in-situ strategies. Most familiar among these are likely to be echo-questions, an example of which is provided in (4):

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- (4) A: Randall invited Bigfoot.
B: Randall invited ↗**who**?

Echo-questions are utterances that echo an immediately preceding utterance and signal—by way of a *wh*-constituent—an intent to address an issue in the discourse known to have been previously resolved (Sobin 2010, Beck and Reis 2018). The *wh*-constituent in echo-questions is prosodically prominent, carrying a pitch accent that represents narrow focus. Echo-questions often involve a rising pitch contour on the *wh*-constituent, though this is not a necessary property of these constructions (Bartels 1999, Beck and Reis 2018).

English also has several non-echoic *wh*-in-situ configurations, which I will refer to collectively as “follow-up” questions (Bartels 1999, Ginzburg and Sag 2001, Pires and Taylor 2009, Bobaljik and Wurmbrand 2015, Biezma 2020, and references). The utterance from B in (5) provides an example. While B’s utterance does not echo the preceding utterance in the discourse, a *wh*-constituent nonetheless grammatically appears in-situ.

- (5) A: So, Carrie is having a party this weekend.
B: Yeah, and she invited ↘**who**?
(adapted from Pires and Taylor 2009:206, (11))

Follow-up questions differ from echo questions in that they presupposes an open issue in the discourse and signal the intent to resolve it. In the case of B’s utterance, the open issue is who Carrie invited to the party and this is signaled to be the current topic of discussion. Here, too, the *wh*-constituent is narrowly focused, making it prosodically prominent. While the *wh*-constituent of B’s utterance can be presented with a falling pitch contour, other prosodic profiles are possible as well (Bartels 1999, Pires and Taylor 2009, Biezma 2020).

At a purely intuitive level, *wh*-in-situ constructions have the conversational value of matrix-level interrogatives.² We see this in a comparison of an embedded *wh*-in-situ construction in (6) with a partial *wh*-fronting construction in (7).

- (6) So, Anne invited someone and Susie said [_{CP} she invited **who**] ?
a. *Matrix Scope* : “ ... and who did Susie say that she invited?”
b. **Embedded Scope* : “ ... and Susie said who she invited.”
- (7) So, Anne invited someone and Susie said [_{CP} **who**₁ she invited *x*₁]
a. **Matrix Scope* : “ ... and who did Susie say that she invited?”
b. *Embedded Scope* : “ ... and Susie said who she invited.”

The in-situ *wh*-constituent is interpreted as if it takes root scope; the speech-act of the right conjunct in (6) serves as a request for information. Partial *wh*-movement, however,

²An issue that deserves significantly more attention than it can be afforded here is the extent to which all English *wh*-in-situ strategies can be treated equivalently. My suspicion is that echo questions may prove to be the occasional odd one out (e.g., Sudo 2007). To avoid any potential confounding factors I encourage follow-up question interpretations by establishing contexts that signal open issues in the discourse.

results only in an embedded question; the speech speech-act in the right conjunct of (7) is a declarative.

A point of debate in the literature concerns whether or not *wh*-in-situ constructions in English are genuinely interrogatives with respect to their syntax and semantics. In section 4.1, I argue that they are compositionally interrogatives and that the in-situ *wh*-constituent achieves root-scope.

Still, there is good reason to think that *wh*-in-situ and *wh*-fronting are compositionally distinct strategies. This is clear from the perspective of clause-embedding predicates. Bobaljik and Wurmbrand (2015) observe that an interrogative-selecting predicate, like *wonder* in (8), cannot embed a *wh*-in-situ construction. This is in contrast to a declarative-selecting predicate, such as *think* in (9), which can only embed a *wh*-in-situ strategy.

- (8) a. *Anne invited someone and Susie wonders [CP C⁰_[-Q] she invited **who**] ?
 b. Anne invited someone and Susie wonders [CP **who**₁ C⁰_[+Q,wh] she invited x_1]
- (9) a. Anne invited someone and Susie thinks [CP C⁰_[-Q] she invited **who**] ?
 b. *Anne invited someone and Susie thinks [CP **who**₁ C⁰_[+Q,wh] she invited x_1]

Like Bobaljik and Wurmbrand (2015), I propose that *wh*-in-situ and *wh*-fronting strategies are syntactico-semantically distinguished, in part, by the identity of the local complementizer. Section 4 will fill in some of the other details regarding the *wh*-in-situ strategy. However, this is enough to understand the contrasts in (8) and (9) as an issue of selection. The predicate *wonder* embeds CPs headed by C⁰_[+Q,wh], which forces *wh*-fronting. The predicate *think* embeds CPs headed by C⁰_[-Q], which permits *wh*-in-situ, but does not license *wh*-fronting.

2.2 Bare *wh*-remnant ellipsis

The idea, again, is that English SLCs are ontologically related to bare remnant ellipsis. Such constructions, commonly referred to also as “stripping,” involve the omission of a clause with the exception of a single remnant constituent, as in (10).

- (10) Ted drinks tea, and possibly [~~he drinks~~ **coffee**].

As also illustrated in (10), it is common to understand the omission of the clause here to be another result of ellipsis (e.g., Hankamer and Sag 1976, Depiante 2000).

It has been observed that the complement clauses of a non-factive predicates permit embedded bare remnant ellipsis (Weir 2014, Wurmbrand 2017). Several examples are presented in (11):

- (11) Anne invited someone and
 Susie { thinks / believes / claimed } [~~she invited~~ **Mark**]

eliding the island domain. This is a result that one would expect if the *wh*-remnant is derived by way of extraction from elided syntactic structure (Barros et al. 2014; cf. Griffiths 2019).⁴

4. Exceptional pronunciation under ellipsis

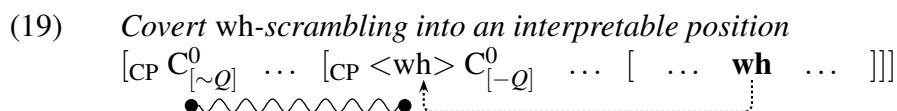
Despite the evidence for a Move-and-Delete analysis, the impossibility of *wh*-fronting in this syntactic environment is problematic. This one critique, among others, that is offered as evidence against Move-and-Delete approaches and, possibly, against ellipsis generally (e.g., Valmala 2007, Ott and Struckmeier 2018). A common recourse for Move-and-Delete proponents is to postulate that remnants undergo exceptional focus-driven movement or phonological movement that is licensed in the context of ellipsis. Although, as Ott and Struckmeier (2018) discuss, this strategy risks being little more than a stipulation.

I will instead argue in favor of an alternative conception of the Move-and-Delete analysis that avoids any such stipulation. This analysis adopts particular theories of both *wh*-in-situ and the pronunciation of movement chains. I introduce each of these component in turn before demonstrating how they interact with ellipsis to derive English SLCs.

4.1 A theory of *wh*-in-situ

Much of the recent literature on single *wh*-in-situ constructions in English and beyond has converged on the idea that they are syntactically and semantically declarative utterances. Any perceived interrogative conventionally implicated via pragmatic means (e.g., Bobaljik and Wurmbrand 2015, Beck and Reis 2018, Biezma 2020).

In line with proposals by Ginzburg and Sag (2001), Pires and Taylor (2009) and Sobin (2010), I argue to the contrary that the interrogative force of a single *wh*-in-situ construction is derived from its syntactic and semantic representation. More specifically, I argue for the type of analysis that has been motivated for multiple-*wh* constructions by Kotek (2019) and Abels and Dayal (2022). Phonologically in-situ *wh*-constituents undergo covert scrambling into a position where they are interpretable by mechanisms associated with the left periphery of the root clause, as sketched in (19). Because this movement is both island-sensitive and clause-bounded, an embedded in-situ *wh*-constituents scrambles as far as the edge of its containing clause, where it is interpreted ($\bullet \sim \sim \sim \bullet$) by a dedicated root $C_{[-Q]}^0$.⁵



This picture of *wh*-in-situ emerges from the selective intervention effects that arise when an embedded in-situ *wh*-constituent appears in the scope of sentential negation. Cur-

⁴See Potter 2017 and Wu in preparation for discussion and contrasting views regarding the island-sensitivity of stripping. Thank you to Andrew Weir (p.c.) for helpful discussion of example (18).

⁵Kotek (2019) argues that an in-situ *wh*-constituent in multiple-*wh* questions moves only as much as is necessary for interpretation. Thus, movement may only target a the edge of vP. Like Abels and Dayal 2022, the analysis presented in section 4.3 depends on movement as far as the edge of the containing clause.

rent wisdom, including Pires and Taylor 2009 and Beck and Reis 2018, holds that single *wh*-in-situ configurations in English do not show intervention effects from tauto-clausal negation, as in (20a). However, when negation appears in a higher clause, as in (20b), *wh*-in-situ is significantly degraded (see also Kotek 2019 and Abels and Dayal 2022).

- (20) a. So, Beth says that Phil didn't read some of the articles;
and she thinks [CP (that) he didn't read **which articles**] ?
- b. So, Beth says that Phil read only some of the articles;
^{??/*}but she doesn't think [CP (that) he read **which articles**] ?

Intervention effects are notoriously delicate. It is useful, then, to contrast the data in (20) with the pair of embedded question constructions in (21). Sentential negation appears in either the root or the embedded clause without an effect on acceptability.

- (21) a. Beth says that Phil didn't read some of the articles and
she asked [CP **which articles** he didn't read]
- b. Beth says that Phil read only some of the articles but
she didn't ask [CP **which articles** he read]

This is a contrast among contrasts that is predicted from the treatment of *wh*-in-situ sketched above.⁶ The LF representations for the *wh*-in-situ constructions of (20) are presented in (22). Intervention effects from tauto-clausal negation are avoided by the postulated covert scrambling of the *wh*-constituent in (22a) to a position that is outside the scope of negation. This is in opposition to (22b), where the clause-boundedness of *wh*-scrambling means that the *wh*-constituent is unable to escape the scope of root clause negation.

- (22) a. ... [CP C_[~Q]⁰ she thinks [CP **which articles** C_[-Q]⁰ he didn't read *x*]]
- b. *... [CP C_[~Q]⁰ she doesn't think [CP **which articles** C_[-Q]⁰ he read *x*]]
-

The lack of intervention effects in the embedded question constructions of (21), on the other hand, can be understood to follow from the different mechanisms available for interpreting *wh*-constituents. Fronted *wh*-constituent in embedded questions are interpreted by the local C_[+Q,wh]⁰. Thus, the placement of negation in either the embedded or root clause cannot intervene in the interpretation of the *wh*-constituent.

4.2 A theory of chain pronunciation

Turning to the second component of the analysis, we adopt a particular algorithm for determining where a moved constituent is pronounced. This algorithm presupposes that syntac-

⁶As a contrast among contrasts, and given the delicacy of the judgements, it is clear that more rigorous quantitative methods will be necessary as this project moves forward.

tic movement, as illustrated below in (23), is the creation of a chain consisting of multiple copies of a syntactic element (e.g., Chomsky 1993, et seq.).

(23) [CP Susie asked [CP **who** C_[+Q,wh]⁰ Anne [vP **who** invited **who**]]]?

The decision of which copy in a movement chain to pronounce is implemented at PF. We will follow Richards (1997) in regard to how this decision is made by appealing to a distinction between strong and weak positions along a movement chain (e.g., Chomsky 1993, Richards 1997). With only the immediate purposes of this analysis in mind, I adopt the following definition a strong position:

- (24) Some XP_F is in a strong position *iff*
- i. XP_F is in a derived specifier of some YP and
 - ii. the content of XP_F agrees with the local head Y_F^0 .

In other words, movement of some XP into a position where it agrees with the local head results in a strong position. Anything else is regarded as a weak position.

With this in hand, we also adopt insights from Gärtner (2002) and Abels and Dayal (2022) to adapt the PF conditions on the pronunciation of a movement chain that are proposed in Richards 1997. We will implement these conditions using the algorithm in (25):

- (25) i. Pronounce the copy in the highest strong position of a movement chain.
 ii. If there is no strong position, pronounce the lowest possible weak position.

Finally, we will treat ellipsis as a mechanism for non-pronunciation that is also implemented at PF. The desired effect that we will see is that a movement chain may be pronounced in an exceptionally high position if ellipsis eliminates lower candidates (Richards 1997, Temmerman 2013, Gribanova and Manetta 2016, Abels and Dayal 2022).

4.3 Exceptional chain pronunciation

We are in a position now to see how these components conspire to generate SLCs in English. However, let us consider first a non-elided embedded question with obligatory *wh*-fronting in (26). Agreement with the local $C_{[+Q,wh]}^0$ motivates movement of the *wh*-constituent to the embedded Spec,CP.

(26) ... and Susie [vP said [CP **who** C_[+Q,wh]⁰ Anne [vP <who> invited <who>]]]?

As a derived specifier that agrees with the local $C_{[+Q,wh]}^0$, the copy in Spec,CP is in a strong position. As the highest strong position in the movement chain, PF necessarily pronounces this copy and the movement is rendered overt.

In (27) below is an instance of an embedded *wh*-in-situ question. As a clause headed by a $C_{[-Q]}^0$, the *wh*-constituent scrambles as far as possible for interpretive purposes.

(27) ... and Susie [_{vP} said [_{CP} <who> C_[-Q]⁰ Anne [_{vP} <who> invited **who**]]]?

Due to its clause-boundedness, *wh*-scrambling terminates in the embedded Spec,CP. Given a lack of agreement between the *wh*-constituent and any local head, there are no strong positions along this movement chain. Thus, PF pronounces the lowest possible copy of the *wh*-constituent, meaning the movement is necessarily rendered covert.

We now introduce ellipsis into the derivation. In the instance of sluicing in (28), agreement with C_[+Q,wh]⁰ again motivates *wh*-movement that terminates in the embedded Spec,CP.

(28) ... and Susie [_{vP} asked [_{CP} **who** C_[+Q,wh]⁰ <IP Anne [_{vP} <who> invited <who>]]]]

Just as above, the copy in Spec,CP is in the highest strong position and is chosen for pronunciation by PF. In this case, the decision comes in the context of IP-Ellipsis, which instructs PF to not pronounce all IP-internal material. While the movement of the *wh*-constituent is ultimately string-vacuous, it is nonetheless rendered overt.

Finally, we can see in example (29) below how English SLCs are derived. Being derived via a *wh*-in-situ strategy means the embedded clause is headed by a C_[-Q]⁰. To ensure its interpretation, the *wh*-constituent scrambles as far as possible, terminating in Spec,CP.⁷

(29) ... and Susie [_{vP} thinks [_{CP} **who** C_[-Q]⁰ <IP Anne [_{vP} <who> invited <who>]]]] ?

There are again no strong positions along the movement chain of the *wh*-constituent. This leaves PF to resort to pronunciation of the lowest possible weak position. This comes again in the context of IP-Ellipsis, which provides instruction to not pronounce IP-internal material. The only viable copy for pronunciation, therefore, is the copy that resides in Spec,CP. Thus, what is usually an instance of covert movement, like we saw in (27) above, is here rendered exceptionally overt in the context ellipsis.

5. Detecting covert movement

This analysis is being presented in the context of a growing literature that provides various in-situ approaches to the conundrum faced here (e.g., Weir 2014, Ott and Struckmeier 2018, Griffiths 2019, Griffiths et al. 2023). Despite their differences, these analyses applied to English SLCs would share the idea that the *wh*-remnant remains syntactically in-situ.

This raises questions regarding the evidence that *wh*-remnants in English SLCs move at all. I argue in this section that standard indicators of movement, including islands and intervention effects, converge on the conclusion that they do undergo syntactic movement.

⁷Ingo Reich (p.c.) points out that nothing in principle precludes an additional movement step to *vP* and that this could provide a more straightforward implementation of the analysis. This is, in fact, the idea proposed by Gribanova and Manetta (2016) for Hindi and entertained by Abels and Dayal (2022) for English, but space precludes satisfactory discussion it here.

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To the extent that analyses of this type are well-motivated, they demonstrate that accommodating data that seem to counter-exemplify the standard Move-and-Delete analysis is not a zero-sum scenario. When faced with apparently immovable remnants, positing exceptional focus-driven movement or abandoning movement-based analyses altogether are not the only analytical possibilities. We can at least entertain the possibility that apparently immovable remnants are, in fact, only otherwise covertly moveable.

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