Can Adjuncts Be Elided? A Bimodal Approach to Adjunct-Inclusive Interpretation

Introduction: This study examines the nature of adjunct-inclusive interpretation in Japanese, a topic of considerable debate in the context of V-stranding VP-ellipsis. While the ellipsis of adjuncts is widely regarded as cross-linguistically impossible (Li 2008; Simpson et al. 2013; Takahashi 2014; Sato & Karimi 2016; Duguine 2017; Panitz 2018), its status in Japanese remains controversial (cf. Landau 2023). Funakoshi (2016) argues that adjuncts cannot be elided independently in Japanese. For example, in (1a), the adjunct is absent from the sentence, and crucially, an adjunct-inclusive interpretation does not arise. However, Funakoshi argues that when the adjunct's clause-mate object is also null, as in (1b), an adjunct-inclusive interpretation becomes possible. He concludes that in such cases, the elided constituent is the VP, with its head having moved out prior to ellipsis, as illustrated in (2).

(1) John-wa teinei-ni kuruma-o arat-ta.
John-TOP carefully car-ACC wash-PAST
'John washed cars carefully.'
a. Bill-mo kuruma-o arat-ta.
Bill-also car-ACC wash-PAST
lit. 'Bill also washed cars.'/ *ADJ-INCL: Bill also washed cars carefully.
b. Bill-mo arat-ta.
Bill-also wash- PAST
lit. 'Bill also washed.' (ADJ-INCL)

(2) Subj [~~$_{VP}$ Adj Obj t_V~~] V

This argument, however, has been challenged by observations that adjunct-inclusive interpretation is indeed possible in sentences like (3), where only the adjunct is missing from the sentence (Kuno 1995; Kamio & Takami 1998; Oku 2016; Tanabe & Kobayashi 2024; see also Landau 2023).

(3) John-wa teinei-ni kono-kuruma-o arat-ta. Bill-wa ano-kuruma-o arat-ta.
John-TOP carefully this-car-ACC wash-PAST Bill-TOP that-car-ACC wash- PAST
lit. 'John washed this car carefully. Bill washed that car.' (ADJ-INCL)

If adjunct ellipsis is fundamentally possible in Japanese, the adjunct-inclusive interpretation in (1b) no longer serves as evidence for the existence of V-stranding VP-ellipsis (Oku 2016; Landau 2023; Tanabe & Kobayashi 2024). Instead, this interpretation can be explained by a combination of adjunct ellipsis and argument ellipsis, the latter of which has been independently attested in Japanese (Oku 1998; Sakamoto 2017; Fujiwara 2022).

Claim: In this study, I show that the adjunct-inclusive interpretations in (1b) and (3) differ fundamentally in nature. Specifically, I argue that the adjunct-inclusive interpretation in (1b) is rooted in syntax, arising from V-stranding VP ellipsis (Funakoshi 2016), whereas the one in (3) is pragmatic (Landau 2023; Tanabe & Kobayashi 2024).

Argument 1: It is well-known that interpretation operates on two levels of meaning: the meaning of utterances and the meaning of expressions (Peccei 1999). For example, Annie's utterance in (4) can be interpreted in two ways: its literal meaning, such as "cats drink milk in general," and the speaker's intended meaning, such as "Felix drank the cream." Importantly, these two meanings differ in terms of whether a linguistic entity can refer to them (cf. Larson 2022). When Mike responds with "I disagree with that," his disagreement targets the literal meaning of the sentence ("cats drink cream in general") rather than Annie's intended meaning ("Felix drank the cream").

(4) [Mike, Annie, and Mike's cat Felix are in the kitchen.]
Mike: What happened to the cream in this bowl?
Annie: Cats drink cream.
Mike: I disagree with that.

Interestingly, the adjunct-inclusive interpretations in (1b) and (3) also exhibits a similar pattern when questioned by another speaker, as shown in (5) and (6). In (5), Speaker B's doubt targets the statement that includes the adjunct meaning. This indicates that the adjunct meaning in (1b) is part of the semantic content and is structurally encoded.

(5) A: "John-wa teinei-ni kuruma-o arat-ta. Bill-mo ara-ta." (=1b)
John-TOP carefully car-ACC wash-PAST Bill-TOP wash- PAST
lit. 'John washed cars carefully. Bill also washed.'
B: "Boku-wa soo omow-anai. Bill-wa teinei-ni kuruma-o araw-nak-atta to omou."
'I don't think so. I think Bill did not wash cars carefully.'

In contrast, in (6), Speaker B can only question the statement without the adjunct meaning. This suggests that the adjunct-inclusive interpretation in (3) arises from pragmatic inference rather than being part of the underlying structure. In other words, the adjunct meaning here is not syntactically represented but

contextually derived.

(6) A: "John-wa teinei-ni kono-kuruma-o arat-ta. Bill-wa ano-kuruma-o arat-ta."(=3)
John-TOP carefully this-car-ACC wash-PAST Bill-TOP that-car-ACC wash- PAST
lit. 'John washed this car carefully. Bill washed that car.'
B: "Boku-wa soo omow-anai. Bill-wa ano-kuruma-o arawanakatta to omou."
'I don't think so. I think Bill didn't wash that car.'
B': #"Boku-wa soo omow-anai. Bill-wa teinei-ni ano-kuruma-o arawanakatta to omou."
'I don't think so. I think Bill didn't wash that car carefully.'

This thus supports Funakoshi's observation that an adjunct cannot be syntactically elided on its own, but can be when its clause-mate object is also elided.

Argument 2: It is also known that pragmatic meaning is not embedded under logical expressions such as negation. For example, in (7), the pragmatic meaning of B's utterance (7B) suggests something like "let's have dinner in the kitchen.", but the negative version (7B') does not imply "let's not have dinner in the kitchen." Instead, what is negated is the literal content of (7B), namely the statement about the room's temperature, and the pragmatic suggestion is no longer present in (7B').

(7) [A and B are in the living room.]
A: Shall we eat dinner in the living room or in the kitchen?
B: It's cold in here.
B': It's not cold in here.

Given this, we can account for the contrast in the (im)possibility of adjunct-inclusive interpretation in negative sentences. Funakoshi (2016) points out that the negative counterpart of (1b) can yield an adjunct-inclusive interpretation, as shown in (8).

(8) John-wa teinei-ni kuruma-o arat-ta. Bill-wa araw-anak-atta.
John-TOP carefully car-ACC wash-PAST Bill-also wash- PAST
lit. 'John washed cars carefully. Bill did not wash.' (ADJ-INCL: Bill did not wash cars carefully.)

On the other hand, Oku (2016) finds that the negative version of (3) does not allow an adjunct-inclusive interpretation, as shown in (9).

(9) John-wa teinei-ni kono-kuruma-o arat-ta. Bill-wa ano-kuruma-o araw-anak-atta.
John-TOP carefully this-car-ACC wash-PAST Bill-TOP that-car-ACC wash-NEG-PAST
lit. 'John washed this car carefully. Bill did not wash that car.' (*ADJ-INCL)

This contrast can be naturally explained if the adjunct-inclusive interpretation in (3) arises from pragmatic meaning: negating the sentence makes the pragmatic inference (i.e. the adjunct-inclusive meaning) unavailable.

Argument 3: The proposed bimodal approach also accounts for the contrast in adjunct-inclusive interpretation between intransitive and transitive sentences. In (10a), where only an adjunct is missing from the second sentence, an adjunct-inclusive interpretation is possible in this intransitive sentence as well. However, the adjunct inclusive interpretation in (10a) differs from that in (3), even though both involve the omission of only an adjunct from the target sentences. Importantly, the adjunct-inclusive interpretation in (10a) can be questioned by another speaker, as shown in (10b; cf. 6).

(10) a. A: Densya-ga zikandoorini tuita. Basu-mo tuita.
train-NOM on.time arrived Bus-also arrived
lit. 'A train arrived on time. A bus also arrived.' (ADJ-INCL: Bus also arrived on time.)
b. B: Boku-wa soo omow-ana-i. Basu-wa ippun okureteta.
'I disagree. The bus arrived one minute late.'

This shows that the missing adjunct in (10a) is rooted in syntactic ellipsis. In addition, the adjunct-inclusive interpretation can be embedded under negation, as shown in (11; cf. 9) (Funakoshi 2016).

(11) Densya-wa zikandoorini tuita. Basu-wa tuk-anak-atta.
train-TOP on.time arrived Bus-TOP arrive-NEG-PAST
lit. 'A train arrived on time. A bus did not arrived.' (ADJ-INCL: Bus did not arrive on time.)

Note that the possibility of ellipsis of adjuncts only in intransitive sentences aligns with the predictions of V-stranding VP-ellipsis, as illustrated in (12).

(12) Subj ~~[VP Adj tV]~~ V

This contrast supports the view that adjuncts in intransitive sentences undergo syntactic ellipsis, while missing adjuncts in transitive sentences (e.g. 3) are driven by pragmatic effects, providing further evidence for the distinction between syntactic and pragmatic sources of adjunct-inclusive interpretation.

Conclusion: This study shows that some adjunct-inclusive interpretations in Japanese arise from pragmatics, while others result from syntactic ellipsis driven by V-stranding VP-ellipsis, thus supporting the existence of V-stranding VP-ellipsis and, furthermore, string vacuous V-movement in Japanese.