**Preposition Omission and Focus in German Fragments: A Case for a Q-Based Approach**

**Background.** In German, retaining the preposition (P) in a fragmentary utterance, as in (1B), is favored over omitting it, as in (1B′) (Molimpakis 2019). There are two possible explanations. On the one hand, Merchant (2001) argues that this is because German does not allow P(reposition)-stranding under regular syntactic movement, as in (2). Therefore, only fragments whose underlying elliptic clause involves ungrammatical P-stranding, as in (3) (where grey shading = ellipsis) are expected to be unacceptable. This is the corollary of the P(reposition)-Stranding Generalization (PSG).

(1) A: Peter hat mit jemandem gesprochen.
'Peter was talking to someone.'
B: Mit wem? B′: ?Wem?
'To who?' 'Who?'

(2) *Wem$_1$ hat Peter mit $t_1$ gesprochen?
'Who was Peter talking to?'

(3) *Wem$_1$ hat Peter **mit** $t_1$ gesprochen?
'Who was Peter talking to?'

On the other hand, Nykiel & Hawkins (N&H) (2020) argue that P-omission is degraded in German because a case-assigning P is required in the fragment so that the case-marked DP can be properly processed (see also Barton & Progovac 2005). According to this approach, the P is only required in a fragment if the DP is case-marked. In German, masculine DPs are overtly case-marked, while feminine and neuter DPs are ambiguous between NOM and ACC. In (4), the masculine DP *einen Mitarbeiter* is unambiguously marked as ACC, while the feminine DP *eine Mitarbeiterin* lacks overt case marking. The fragment (4B′) must be interpreted as ACC, since the case-assigning P is retained. In (4B″), however, a reading as NOM is available. According to N&H, no processing burden should occur, as NOM is the default case in German. Thus, the P-omission in (4B″) is predicted to be acceptable. Note that while Lemke (2021) found a preference for P-omission in prepositional case-marked DPs to NOM ones, he only tested fragments that are unambiguously NOM. This resulted in case mismatches between the correlate and the DP in the fragment, which, as Molimpakis (2019) points out, leads to lower acceptability.

Furthermore, the fragment with P-omission in (4B″) could be derived either from an isomorphic elliptic clause (5i) that is syntactically parallel to the antecedent clause or a copular clause (5ii). There is no consensus in the literature {if / under which conditions} cleft structures can be the underlying structure for a fragment (Nykiel 2013, Ronai & Stigliano 2020, Rodrigues et al. 2009, Craenenbroeck 2010, Szczegelniak 2008). Crucially, (5ii) circumvents the ungrammatical P-stranding. Thus, (4B″) is predicted to be acceptable by Merchant's PSG as well. I hypothesize (**H1**) that P-omission is only degraded if the fragment is overtly case-marked and an ungrammatical P-stranding is required to derive the fragment. Note that in German, only masculine DPs are overtly case-marked and a copular clause is available as underlying clause exclusively for feminine and neuter DPs.

(4) A: Der Chef hat sich über jemanden aufgeregt.
'The boss got upset about an employee.'
B: Ja, (über) einen Mitarbeiter.
'Yes, (about) an employee.M.'
B′: Ja, über eine Mitarbeiterin.
'Yes, about an employee.F.'
B″: Ja, eine Mitarbeiterin.
'Yes, an employee.F.'

(5) i. [$_{CP}$ [eine.**ACC** Mitarbeiterin.F.**ACC**]$_1$ hat [$_{TP}$ sich der Chef **über** $t_1$ aufgeregt]]
'Yes, an employee the boss got upset about.'
ii. [$_{CP}$ [eine.**NOM** Mitarbeiterin.F.**NOM**]$_1$ war [$_{TP}$ das $t_1$]]
'Yes, **an employee that was**.'

Additionally, Barros (2012) proposes that the presence of contrastive focus on the fragment forces one to interpret the elliptic clause as an isomorphic to the antecedent. As a result, no copular clause can serve as the underlying clause. This prevents the availability of a copular clause for covertly case-marked DPs. Thus, the fragment (6B′) can only be derived from the isomorphic clause (7) which requires ungrammatical P-stranding. Therefore, (6B′) is predicted to be unacceptable, despite being covertly case-marked. Thus, I hypothesize (**H2**) that P-omission is generally degraded in contrastive focus, independent of case marking.

(6) A: Der Chef hat sich über seinen Vorgänger aufgeregt.
'The boss got upset about his predecessor.'
B: Nein, über eine Mitarbeiterin.
'No, about an employee.F.'
B′: Nein, eine Mitarbeiterin.
'No, an employee.F.'

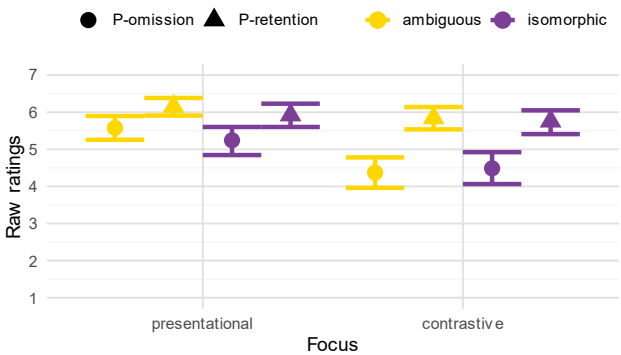
(7) Nein, [$_{CP}$ [eine.**ACC** Mitarbeiterin.F.**ACC**]$_1$ hat [$_{TP}$ sich der Chef **über** $t_1$ aufgeregt]]
'No, an employee the boss got upset about.'

**Experiments.** 48 German monolingual speakers were sourced via Prolific (online, unsupervised). The study tested the factors PREPOSITION (P-retention or P-omission), CLAUSE (isomorphic or ambiguous), and FOCUS (contrastive or presentational), with 4 repetitions per condition selected from 16 lexical sets, with a 2:1 ratio of fillers to test items. Participants rated the naturalness of speaker B's answer on a 1-7 Likert scale, where 1 = fully unnatural and 7 = fully natural. Figure 1 shows the mean ratings per condition. Participants' raw ratings were z-scored and analyzed using linear mixed models in R's *lmer*.

**Results.** Figure 1 shows that P-retention is generally preferred ($t = 6.39$, $p < 0.01$). Whether the case marking of the fragment requires an isomorphic or an ambiguous underlying elliptic clause is not significant ($t = -0.25$, $p = 0.80$). Thus, H1 is not supported.

When incorporating contrastive stimuli, an interaction between FOCUS and PREPOSITION emerges ($t = -3.56$, $p < 0.01$). That is, P-omission becomes even more degraded under contrastive focus, thus supporting H2.

**Figure 1**




**Discussion.** The data challenges N&H's approach, as overt case-marking does not emerge as a significant factor influencing P-omission. Similarly, the data contradicts Merchant's PSG, showing no significant difference between fragments derived by ungrammatical P-stranding and those that do not involve P-stranding. Moreover, the pattern observed by Lemke (2021) does not hold when the DP in the fragment is covertly case-marked. To account for these findings, I propose that the implicit question Q required to elicit a fragment answer (Ginzburg 1994) is not merely a reflection of the discourse's information structure but must also function as a syntactically well-formed linguistic object (following Griffiths 2019). This represents a significant departure from traditional assumptions about inferred questions and can fully explain the data. For instance, in German, Q must include the P, as illustrated in (2), to license a fragment. Using (8ii) as the inferred Q, which omits the P, is not viable, as this would incorrectly link the fragment to the subject DP rather than the correlate. In the presentation, I will present further experimental evidence to support this syntactically grounded view of inferred questions and show why (8ii) fails to serve as Q.

(8) i. Q: Über wen hat sich der Chef aufgeregt? ('About who did the boss get upset?')
ii. Q: Wer war das? ('Who was that?')

The underlying structure of the fragment must be isomorphic to the structure of the Q, i.e. retaining P. That is, the P is part of the focused the structured meaning of the Q and B's response must match, i.e. the fragment must retain the P as well, as shown for English in (9i) (where chevrons = structured meaning). Thus, P-omission is degraded, independent of whether the fragment is case-marked or not.

(9) i. A: The boss got upset about someone.
B: Yes, he got upset about an employee. <*f*, the boss got upset *f*(about *x*)>
B′: Yes, he got upset about an employee. <*f*, the boss got upset about *f*(*x*)>
ii. A: The boss got upset about his predecessor.
B: No, he got upset [$_F$ about an EMPLOYEE].
iii. Q: About who did he get upset, then? *corrective Q*

Under contrastive focus, as in (9ii), a 'corrective Q' (adapted from Griffiths 2019) is triggered by speaker B' use of the negative expression *No*. This corrective Q in (9iii) directly links the fragments to the corrective element and, in German, it reinforces the need to retain the P to align the fragment with the antecedent clause, making P-omission even less acceptable.

**Conclusions.** Not only do my experimental results provide strong support for the Q-based approach to clausal ellipsis, but they undermine its competitors. For instance, Merchant (2001) and N&H incorrectly predict an interaction between CLAUSE and PREPOSITION. In the presentation, I will provide further crosslinguistic evidence in favor of this approach.

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