

# Henry Sweet Lecture 2016

## Verb Root Ellipsis

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Akabea [abj], an extinct language of the Andaman Islands, exhibits the phenomenon of Verb Root Ellipsis, whereby, under certain conditions, the root of a verb may be omitted, leaving behind affixes and clitics. The types extractable from the documentation of the language are as follows:

- (a) the verb root is retrievable from the preceding conversational turn (1-2);
- (b) the motion verb *ɔn* 'come, go' is clear from the context (3);
- (c) the verb root *pere* 'strike' is apparently omissible context-freely (4-5).

The phenomenon is cross-linguistically rare; to the best of our knowledge, it is found otherwise only in Inuktitut [iku] of Canada, Kwaza [xwa] of Brazil, and Jingulu [jig] of Australia, with quite similar conditions applying across all languages – possibly significant differences across the four languages will be discussed. It is also unexpected, since the result is a string of affixes and/or clitics without any root, in violation of the usual conception of affixes and clitics as bound elements.

Functionally, the phenomenon bears close similarity to verb ellipsis (including ellipsis of longer stretches including a verb) in English and many other languages. However, the phenomenon in these languages is crucially different formally in that when a verb is ellipsed, all of its morphology disappears along with it, as in English *I am* in answer to *Are you leaving?* (ellipsis of verb *leave* along with the present participle suffix), or German *ich muss nach Leipzig*, cf. the non-ellipted version *ich muss nach Leipzig gehen* 'I must go to Leipzig' (ellipsis of the verb *geh-* 'go' along with the infinitive suffix).

Formally, verb root ellipsis is similar to the phenomenon of zero roots or root allomorphs for particular lexical items, e.g. Amele [aey] -Ø- 'get' (Roberts 1987: 279, 386-387, 390) or Koasati [cku] -Ø- 'give' (Kimball 1991: 102). This also gives rise to a sequence of affixes and clitics without an (overt) root. Both phenomena present the phonological problem of how to pronounce such a sequence. However, they also differ significantly in that the lexical item corresponding to a lexical zero root is always retrievable from the morphological structure of the word, while retrieval of an ellipsed verb root typically requires reference to the broader context.

Verb root ellipsis is thus an unexpected (and indeed cross-linguistically rare) phenomenon with links to the more frequent phenomenon of verb ellipsis and the phenomenon, also rare cross-linguistically, of lexical zero roots. The scant available material suggests interesting universals and parameters of variation. Hopefully, more languages with verb root ellipsis will be identified, putting the study of the phenomenon on a broader footing both in its own right and in relation to adjacent phenomena.

## Data

- (1) atfitek reg dama mek-ke  
now pig flesh eat-npst  
'Eat some pork now!'
- (2) yaba=da / wai dila=len d-o Ø-ke  
NEG=COP FOC evening=LOC 1SG-II ZROOT-npst  
'No (lit. (it) is not). I will in the evening'
- (3) an η-ar-at-duru dele-ηa=lat Ø-ke  
Y/N 2-SP-PL-all hunt-NMLZ=ALL ZROOT-npst  
'Will you all (go) hunting?'
- (4) d-o η=ot-pere-ke  
1SG-II 2.VII=SP-strike-npst  
'I will strike you on the head'
- (5) d-o η=ot-Ø-ke  
1SG-II 2.VII=SP-ZROOT-npst  
'I will strike you on the head'

## Abbreviations

ALL	allative
COP	copula
FOC	focus
LOC	locative
NEG	negative
NMLZ	nominalization
NPST	non-past
PL	plural
SG	singular
SP	somatic prefix
Y/N	polarity question marker
ZROOT	zero root

Roman numerals indicate different series of pronouns.

## References

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