

The Analysis of Ellipsis Found in CODA — based on SFL theories

Xuqiao Zhou *

Shude High School, Chengdu, China

* Corresponding Author Email: 1067598120@qq.com

Abstract. This study investigates the use of ASL ellipsis in a family argument context from CODA. Drawing on the theoretical framework of SFL, this study aims to uncover the practical application and function of ellipsis in ASL. It argues that ellipsis is not a grammatical flaw, but rather a linguistic strategy influenced by context, emotion, in interpersonal relationships, and contextual content. This study employed a case study approach, transcribed video data into ELAN software, and focused on analyzing the use of ellipsis in sentences with subjects, predicates, and objects. The results indicate that the use of ellipsis in ASL is highly context-dependent and relies on eye contact, facial expression, spatial relationships, and body movements for compensation. It suggests that ellipsis plays a key role in conceptual, interpersonal, and discourse functions, enhancing cohesion, expressing emotion, and improving expressive efficiency. Further more, this study highlights how ASL expressions in film reflect real-life sign language communication. This study sheds light on the operational mechanisms of ellipsis in visual and multimodal contexts, contributing to the study of ASL applications in real world settings.

Keywords: ASL, SFL, Ellipsis, Film.

1. Introduction

The Sign language is not a universal language. Each country has its own sign language, and different regions may also have dialects, much like the many languages spoken around the world (NAD) [1]. Like any spoken language, ASL has its own unique and rich grammatical and syntactic rules, including morphological syntactic variation, topic-comment structure, and ellipsis. In recent decades, there has been increasing attention to the sentence structure and pragmatic features of ASL, particularly in applying theories of spoken language to sign language discourse.[2] American sign language (ASL) is a kind of language that helps people communicate with visual signs, including hand shape, placement, movement, facial expressions, and 1 body movements, which is mainly used in America and most parts of Canada. “In the sign languages of the deaf some signs can meaningfully point toward things or can be meaningfully placed in the space ahead of the signer. Such spatial uses of signs are an obligatory part of fluent grammatical signing.” “Pronouns can be directed toward the signer, the addressee, others present, or toward other things in the signer’s environment.” [3] The term ‘ellipsis’ originates from Greek: ‘elleipsis’, meaning ‘omission’, defined as the removal of structures ‘lacking elements that can be recovered or inferred from the context’. Even if this part is not expressed in the sentence, it can still be recovered from the context as linguistic elements. In linguistics, ellipsis is often regarded as a discourse strategy that allows speakers to reduce redundancy and improve efficiency [4]. In ASL, ellipsis can manifest in various ways: omitting subjects, predicates, or objects, usually recovering the omitted information through non-manual signals such as facial expressions, gaze direction, or body movements to maintain sentence coherence. Although a large body of literature discusses the application of ellipsis in spoken language, especially from structural and functional perspectives, there is still a certain research gap regarding the use of ellipsis in sign language. For ASL, its unique grammatical mechanisms (visual information transmission methods) differ significantly from the application of ellipsis in spoken language. The discussion of its occurrence and function in sign language, especially in real, natural contexts, is still relatively lacking. This study, based on actual scenes from the film CODA [5], explores the use of ASL elliptical sentences in domestic settings. Drawing on the theoretical framework of the SFL, this study examines

how specific contexts influence the structure and frequency of elliptical sentences in ASL, discussing their role in grammatical strategy, interpersonal function, and textual function. This focus on the use of elliptical sentences in actual film dialogues will contribute to a deeper understanding of how elliptical structures operate in the everyday conversations of sign language users and the impact of context on their grammatical choices.

2. Methodology

This study uses qualitative research methods to explore the phenomenon of ASL ellipsis. The data is a family scene clip from CODA (0:26:07 — 0:27:46). Qualitative research can deeply explore the language and symbolic patterns in context-rich sign language interactions. According to Creswell and Creswell [6], qualitative research is essentially interpretive and descriptive, allowing researchers to focus on the process of semantic construction, especially the process of meaning construction expressed through language and non-verbal symbols. The data for this study comes from a clip of a family quarrel scene between Ruby, Leo and their father Frank. The reason for choosing this scene is that the protagonists in the clip express strong emotions, the interlocutors are family members (close relationship), and the ellipsis structure appears frequently. The Researcher analyzed not only from the perspective of ASL gestures, but also non-manual signals such as facial expressions, eye gaze direction, body movements, etc. The main tool for data transcription and annotation is ELAN. ELAN enables researchers to annotate video data at multiple levels, including GLOSS... (levels in the software). Especially in the analysis of elliptical sentences, ELAN helps to discover and analyze the use of non-manual signals, which is very important for capturing multi-modal characteristics. The study includes the following steps: First, select relevant scenes from CODA and watch them repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the interactive context. Second, import the video data into ELAN and segment it into sentence units. Multi-level annotations are performed on each sentence (at each level): GLOSS-transcription based on standard ASL, non-manual signals-including facial expressions, eye contact... Third, the omission of discourse is analyzed. According to the presence or absence of expected sentence components, elliptical sentences are divided into three categories-object, predicate, and subject omission. Fourth, with the support of the SFL theory, the function of each elliptical structure is interpreted, focusing on conceptual function, interpersonal function, and discourse function. During the research process, guided by ASL and the SFL theories, the ELAN software was used to observe and annotate the expressions of signers in detail, allowing researchers to fully understand the use of ellipsis in family conversations. This method ensures that both sign language features and non-manual signals can be fully analyzed, thus laying the foundation for subsequent discussions.

3. Findings: Types and Examples of Ellipsis in CODA

3.1. Overview of Data

One home setting scene is selected from the film CODA. It lasts approximately 1 minute and 37 seconds, involving the emotionally charged interaction among three characters: Ruby, brother Leo, and Father Frank. Ruby went to the fish processing factory, named Salgado's Processing, noticing that the buyer offered his brother the unfairly low price. So, she interrupts the conversation between the buyer and her brother. Her intervention disrupts Leo's negotiation, which triggered the quarrel between the siblings. Eventually, their father Frank stepped in to mediate and try to ease the argument. A total of 20 sentences were identified, of which 6 sentences had different types of omission structures, accounting for 30%. These omissions are categorized into three primary syntactic types: object omission, predicate omission, and subject omission, with an additional focus on how non-manual features (e.g. facial expressions, gaze direction, body posture) contribute to the restoration of the omitted elements. The analysis applies to a SFL framework, examining ellipsis not only as a syntactic absence, but as a strategic, context-based communicative phenomenon that fulfills ideational, interpersonal and textual 3 metafunctions.

3.2. Object Omission

a. "He is ripping you off !"

Gloss: "HE RIP OFF"

Omitted Element: Object– "you"

This sentence occurs when Ruby angrily tries to expose the buyer's unfair pricing. Ruby's eyes are fixed on LEO, the intended referent, during the "RIP OFF" gesture. This non-gestural information plays a role of indication and makes up for syntactic ellipsis. Although the object "you" is not clearly expressed in sign language, the recipient can accurately fill in the omitted component due to the direction of the character's eyes and the coherence of the dialogue. At the same time, the facial expression expresses anger, and although the object is omitted at the grammatical level, the brief sign language expression emphasizes the protagonist's position. The interlocutor can infer the omitted pronoun based on the coherence of the text, which is consistent with the text function in the SFL. The omitted pronoun improves the conciseness of the sentence without affecting the clarity of the sentence. The information of the object "you" is clearly conveyed and restored. From the perspective of the text, the omission here establishes continuity with the previous dialogue through gestures and eye contact.

b. "So do it !"

Gloss: "YOURSELF THERE"

Omitted Element: Object– "it"; Predicate– "do"

This sentence is Ruby's sharp rebuttal to Frank's dissatisfaction with the buyer. Ruby encourages Frank to take practical action instead of just complaining. This sentence omits the predicate verb and the object and emphatically points out "yourself" and "there" to give clues to the omitted information. Through concise and powerful gestures and eye contact, an imperative tone is created. Omission here plays the interpersonal function of the SFL meta-function, expressing confrontation and urgency, close to real-life conversations, and minimizing the grammatical complexity, making the sentence smooth and flexible.

c. "... you cannot cross-check it !"

Gloss: "... YOU CAN'T CROSS-CHECK"

Omitted Element: Object– "it"

Ruby criticized Leo for not being able to check the purchase price of the fish with his buyer. The omitted object "it" refers to the price mentioned earlier, which is a topic that all the interlocutors are concerned about and discussing. When Ruby made the "CROSS CHECK" gesture, her expression became sarcastic, and Frank walked between the siblings and blocked their quarrel with his body. This reflects that in real contexts, body movements will interfere with the expression of sign language, resulting in omissions. The omission here uses the common context of the interlocutors to simplify the expression. The omission of the object "it" can be inferred from the previous work "price", which is a manifestation of the discourse function in the SFL theory, that is, using the previous information can reduce the language burden and ensure the connection and coherence of the sentence.

3.3. Predicate Omission

d. "We are out in public."

Gloss: "WE HERE PUBLIC"

Omitted Element: Verb– "are"

After arguing with her brother, Ruby walked out of the processing plant and saw her father smoking marijuana outside. Ruby tried to emphasize the inappropriate behavior of Frank smoking marijuana in public. When Ruby used gestures to describe "WE HERE PUBLIC", she had a puzzled expression and a hand-spreading gesture (non-manual features) to show her disapproval of her father's behavior. Although there is no predicate, the semantics is clear, and the non-gestural information expresses disapproval. The omission of the predicate verb "are" is a grammatical feature of ASL, which usually allows the use of such sentence structures. Here, the predicate verb in the sentence in which Ruby is in a spatial state, the sign language user or the receiver is placed in a

recognizable physical environment. From the perspective of this function, being in a common physical environment allows the omission of the predicate verb to reduce the redundancy of language expression.

e. "What the hell was that?"

Gloss: "WHY HELL THAT"

Omitted Element: Verb– "was"

Leo is very angry about Ruby's help in negotiating the price for him. This sentence is complete in meaning even though the word "is" is omitted, through exaggerated gestures and strong eye contact. The gesture expresses Leo's anger with the help of non-manual features... The omission of the predicate verb "is" is a grammatical feature of ASL, which generally allows this type of sentence structure. In this case, the omission of the expression enhances the emotional impact and is consistent with interpersonal function, reflecting the relevance of ASL to emotion.

3.4. Subject Omission

f. "I got the price up, didn't I?"

Gloss: "VALUE INCREASE RIGHT. WHAT"

Omitted Element: Subject– "I"

The referent remains clear from contextual cues and pointing gestures. The elder brother thinks he can do the job without Ruby's help but is upset because Ruby interrupted his conversation with the merchant. This sentence is Ruby's defense for her intervention (interrupting the discussion between Leo and the buyer). The subject "I" is omitted because Ruby's speaker is reflected in the continuous dialogue and gestures. The sentence emphasizes "price", which implies the difference in price and also implies the reason why Ruby (angrily) interrupted the conversation between the two. The rhetorical question "right" at the end is expressed by pouting and shaking his head left and right (non-manual features), which implies a rhetorical tone. The omission of the subject here, because the previous event is coherent with this conversation (discourse function), so even if the subject "I" is omitted here, both parties can understand the meaning (restore the subject information of the sentence). In order to improve the efficiency of expression and highlight the key points, the known content (the speaker himself) will be omitted.

4. Discussion

4.1. Ellipsis as a Simplification Strategy

From the standpoint of Sign Language (SL), ellipsis is not a loss of meaning but rather a method of reducing redundancy in language by omitting elements that can be inferred from context, thereby aiding in the construction of complete meaning. In CODA, 30% of sentences include ellipsis structures, which underscores the significance of ASL ellipsis in informal contexts. Similar phenomena are observed in everyday spoken language, where pronouns, personal pronouns, and verbs are omitted based on mutual understanding from preceding context or surrounding dialogue. In American Sign Language (ASL), the use of visual gestures permits the application of similar ellipsis, as signers utilize spatial information and non-manual gestures to recover and reinforce sentence meaning.

The three types of ellipsis we have collected, namely object, predicate, and subject ellipsis, all contribute to simplified expression. For instance, in object ellipsis sentences, expressions such as "HE RIP OFF" illustrate how personal pronouns are highly recognizable in shared spatial and conversational contexts. Due to Ruby's continuous gaze and character's spatial position, the omission of the object "you" can be compensated for. Predicate ellipsis sentences, particularly the omission of copulas, adhere to ASL grammatical requirements, eliminating the need for copulas to indicate spatial position or grammatical structure. In subject ellipsis sentences, Example 6 "VALUE INCREASE RIGHT?" utilizes continuous dialogue shifts and context to clearly identify the signer's identity, ensuring sentence clarity and completeness without the necessity for a subject.

4.2. Non-Manual Features

One significant finding of this study is the role of non-manual information, including facial expressions and body movements, in filling the gaps left by elliptical sentences. Unlike spoken language, which relies on intonation and rhythmic cues, American Sign Language (ASL) utilizes gaze, head movements, and body posture as indicators to restore the omitted semantic elements.

In Example a, Ruby's gaze substitutes for the omitted pronoun "you." In the phrase "HE RIP OFF," her eye contact with Leo clearly indicates the referent of the pronoun. Similarly, in Example b, Ruby expresses (describe the content of "you cannot cross-check" in your own words), and the omitted object "it" is recovered through the context. Frank's bodily intervention in the conversation (standing between the siblings to interrupt their argument, describe) serves as non-manual information, adding a visual reference point to the dialogue scene, ...specifically how it helps restore the object element.

In Example d "WE HERE PUBLIC," Ruby's shoulder shrug and hand waving while outdoors visually reinforce the predicate. The exaggerated bodily movements express her disapproval (accusation) of her father's inappropriate behavior of smoking marijuana in a public place. These non-manual actions enable the interlocutors to construct the omitted content without compromising the clarity of the language expression.

In Example f "VALUE INCREASE RIGHT. WHAT," Ruby uses a "WHAT" gesture with her hands spread and palms facing up, moving from her chest to the sides of her body. This gesture differs from the standard ASL "WHAT" sign, reflecting Ruby's internal disapproval and sense of helplessness towards her brother's behavior. Additionally, Ruby's facial expression of pursed lips while performing the "WHAT" gesture intensifies the tone of her rhetorical question and conveys her dissatisfaction.

In ASL, a wealth of non-manual information collaboratively constructs the meaning of sentences, often compensating for and restoring the omitted content.

4.3. Ellipsis and Interpersonal Function

Another crucial dimension of this study is the analysis and revelation of the interpersonal functions embodied in elliptical sentences. SFL posits that language can shape social relationships [7], elliptical sentences carry interpersonal meaning, often reflecting characters' power status, emotional intensity, and the familiarity between characters. The family scenes selected from the film CODA underscore the pivotal significance of elliptical sentences in discourse communication. For instance, in Example b "YOUR SELF THAT," Ruby omits the predicate and object, yet conveys a strong imperative tone and emotional dissatisfaction. The ellipsis here is not merely a concise expression but also a powerful means of emotional communication, expressing her anger, discontent, and frustration toward Frank's.

Similarly, in Example e "What the hell was that?" Leo omits the predicate "was" when emotionally questioning Ruby. His emotions are conveyed through tense facial expressions and forceful, rapid hand gestures, typical of an intense argument. In such highly emotional contexts, ellipsis helps emphasize emotional fluctuations and create a sense of urgency. From a power dynamics perspective, Ruby interrupts Leo's negotiation with the fish buyer, demonstrating a higher power status than Leo and implying a challenge to his authority. Leo's concise and emotionally charged expression not only reveals his defensiveness but also indicates his attempt to regain control of the situation and reinforce his power position in the business negotiations with the fish buyer. Therefore, the use of ellipsis here is not merely a grammatical preference but also reflects emotional and relational stances, serving as a key tool for power negotiation and emotional expression in family settings.

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4.4. Ellipsis and Textual Function

According to the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory, the textual function primarily focuses on how textual information is organized and connected within discourse, ensuring that the text or interlocutors can construct meaning within a continuous context [8]. Ellipsis can achieve textual cohesion and is an important manifestation of linguistic coherence, often appearing in highly interactive dialogues.

In the sample segments from CODA, ellipsis occurs in multiple dialogues, constructing a tense and highly efficient communicative text within the family scenario. For instance, after Ruby explicitly points out the low purchase price of the fish, the core term "price" does not reappear repeatedly. In the utterance "...YOU CAN'T CROSS-CHECK!" the object "it," referring to "price," is omitted by the speaker. Nonetheless, with the aid of the preceding conversation and the strong emotional fluctuations, the focus of the discourse is not weakened here; instead, it becomes more intense due to the concise and condensed language.

Similarly, in Example e, when Leo questions Ruby with "What the hell was that?" although the predicate "was" is omitted, the sentence still precisely conveys the emotions of doubt and anger. Therefore, even without the predicate, Leo's emotional state, tense bodily movements, and the close connection of the central word "that" to the previous price incident allow the omitted part to be fully recovered from the context.

In terms of discourse structure, ellipsis also achieves textual cohesion through anaphora. The semantics of "YOURSELF THAT" relies on Frank's previous statement, "I'd give my left nut to tell them to go screw themselves." Here, the omitted verb "do" and object "it" in Ruby's response refer to Frank's suggestion of "go screw themselves..." resulting in a clear meaning and coherent logic. This type of elliptical structure depends on the capture and response to the topic information in the preceding text, reflecting the logical progression and unity of the discourse at the conversational level.

In summary, ellipsis in ASL is not only a grammatical feature but also reflects textual coherence and cohesive strategies at the textual level. From the perspective of the SFL textual function, ellipsis makes ASL expression more interactive, efficient, and linguistically tense.

4.5. Context and Ellipsis Frequency

The family scene selected is a conversation between familiar family members, where the interlocutors have a high degree of knowledge sharing and the dialogue turns frequently. Such a scene is very suitable for the application of elliptical structures because the syntactic completeness requirements are low, while the speed of communication, emotional expression and common understanding are more important. As siblings, Leo and Ruby prefer elliptical discourse structures due to their common background (family, life). As the father, Frank's interjections are characterized by non-manual signals such as body intervention, which further reflects how the interactive situation reduces the requirements for syntactic completeness.

In Example c, Ruby looks directly at her father Frank and says "So do it", omitting the verb and object. The semantics of the sentence are restored by the previous topic, that is, Frank's contempt for the fish buyer. Since both interlocutors are dedicated to the discussion of this topic, the omitted part can be inferred from the context. This is in line with the register theory of the SFL, with three dimensions- theme (common topic of selling fish), tenor (father-daughter, close family relationship) and mode (face-to-face sign language interaction). From the perspective of the subject (field), the discussion of the unreasonable pricing behavior of the fish buyer in this segment is a familiar topic for family members. In such familiar scenes, the high sharing of the topic allows the discourse to omit key components based on the context. The intimacy of this scene (more commonalities and shared knowledge) makes omissions more frequent. Unlike formal or low knowledge sharing low contexts, the family environment can rely on previous topic discussions and shared knowledge among members.

At the same time, from the perspective of emotional intensity of communication, disputes between family members often have high emotional tension, and the interlocutors respond quickly and may interrupt each other. In such high-tension contexts, interlocutors are more inclined to express emotions rather than complete sentences. In Example c, even though Ruby omitted the verb and object, the sentence information was complete and impactful in the emotional and concise and powerful gesture expression. This emotion-driven omission strategy is closely related to the interpersonal function of language.

For instance, from the perspective of role relationships, Ruby, Leo, and Frank in the scene form a close family relationship, which reflects the SFL theory that "the closer the interpersonal distance, the more concise the language" [9]. In disputes between relatives, information is often omitted rather than honored. For instance, in Example d, Ruby uses the simple sentence "WE HERE PUBLIC" to criticize her father for smoking marijuana in a public place. Due to the highly shared information context within the family, omitting the predicate "are" does not hinder understanding.

In summary, the ellipsis of ASL is not only related to the grammatical characteristics of the language itself but also affected by the conversation context. Family scenes, close relationships, high information sharing, and emotional tension together constitute a language environment that promotes the high frequency of elliptical sentences. In conversations, language structures are omitted driven by communication speed and efficiency and are smoothly reconstructed with the help of non-manual signals and shared cognition. This shows that ASL ellipsis is not a structural deficiency, but a product of the interaction between discourse and context.

5. Conclusion

This study uses the SFL theoretical framework to focus on a family conflict scene in the movie CODA and explores the use of ellipsis in ASL. The study found that ellipsis in ASL is not an incomplete language expression or a syntactic defect but reflects a systematic and multi-modal communication strategy. ASL users communicate efficiently through non manual signals, including facial expressions, visual direction, body movements, etc.

The study divides ellipsis into objects, predicates, and subject ellipsis and identifies their role in the scene. These ellipses express the interlocutor's position, reflect urgency and conflict, play an interpersonal function in emotionally charged moments, and enhance the function of discourse through the close connection of language in interactive dialogue. This ellipsis structure is more common between interlocutors who are very familiar and have shared experiences, as reflected in the family scene in the film.

In addition, this study also highlights how the frequency of ellipsis is affected by context and interpersonal relationships. The more intimate and emotional the context, the more concise the language tends to be and rely on a common information background. -Supporting the view of the SFL, language form is affected by social factors and context. This analysis contributes to the study of ASL by showing that elliptical structures in American Sign Language are not only grammatical but also socio-semiotic. Ellipsis in sign language cannot be understood solely through textual transcription, but requires a focus on embodied, context-specific interactions. This study demonstrates the manifestation of the SFL in everyday sign language, extending its use beyond spoken and written language.

Future research could extend the analysis to other communication contexts and domains, as well as further explore how ellipsis is used in social roles and formal settings. In addition, combining quantitative corpus research methods with annotation tools such as ELAN will enable a broader exploration of elliptical patterns in ASL and other sign languages.

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