

When silence gets in the way: asymmetric extraction from ellipsis in British dialects

Gary Thoms and Craig Sailor

Introduction. “British *do*” is a variant of VP-ellipsis in British English where the auxiliary that would immediately precede the ellipsis site is followed by a nonfinite form of *do* (1, Baker 1984). An intriguing property of BrE *do* noted by Baltin (2005) is that this putative ellipsis site resists both *wh*-extraction (2), and QR for object>subject scope (3) (unlike regular VPE):

(1) a. I won’t leave early, but John might do. b. I didn’t leave early, but I should have done.

(2) *Although I don’t know which book Fred will read, I do know which book Tom will do.

(3) Some man will read every book and some woman will do, too. **every*>*some*

These facts lead Baltin (2005) to conclude that BrE *do* is a verbal proform: an atomic element out of which nothing can move. However, it has since been observed that there are a number of situations where BrE *do* does seem to allow extraction, namely with topicalization (4), relativization (5), raising (6) and QR for object>negation scope (7):

(4) (?)Hazelnuts, he won’t eat, but almonds, he might do. Abels 2012

(5) A man who steals does not incur the same measure of public reprobation which he would have done in the past. Baker 1984

(6) He ate more than he should have done. Abels 2012

(7) John might seem to enjoy that, and Fred might do, too. Baltin 2012

(8) Rab won’t finish 2/3 of the exam, and Morag won’t do either. 2/3>*neg*; Thoms 2011

Thus, it seems to be an instance of VPE, albeit one which resists extraction (Aelbrecht 2010). Thoms (2011) argues that the correct generalisation is not that BrE *do* prevents extraction, but rather that it **disrupts reconstruction of extracted material**, be it A’-moved or A-moved (see also Abels 2012). If correct, the difference in acceptability between (3) and (8) is due to the fact that object>subject scope requires subject reconstruction into *vP* (Hornstein 1995) but object>neg scope doesn’t, and the difference between *wh*-extraction and relativization is due to the fact that *wh*-movement always reconstructs but relativization often doesn’t (Sauerland 2003).

The puzzle. It isn’t at all clear why such a generalisation (“don’t reconstruct into a VPE site demarcated by *do*”) should hold, given that the additional *do* is a dummy element with no discernible semantic content. Non-*do* VPE freely allows reconstruction back into the ellipsis site, so it is evidently something about *do* itself that causes the problem. The question then arises: why would *do*, a dummy element, block reconstruction, and only in the context of VPE?

Proposal. We argue that reconstruction itself isn’t actually the relevant factor here, but rather the means by which reconstruction occurs. If reconstruction is simply interpretation of a lower (unpronounced) copy (Chomsky 1995), then such a copy must be present/licensed to achieve a reconstructed reading. Crucially, though, the dependencies discussed above that don’t allow reconstruction don’t involve lower copies.

Non-reconstructing topicalization (4), relatives (5), comparatives (6), etc. are all A’-dependencies that have been independently argued to involve null operators, plus base-generation of the left-edge element: Lasnik & Stowell (1991) on topicalization, Carlson (1977) on matching (non-raising) relatives, Chomsky (1977) and Kennedy & Merchant (2000) on comparatives. As operator phenomena, none involve movement of the actual left-edge XP, and thus no lower copies of XP (and thus no reconstruction). Clear confirmation of this can be seen in minimally different examples where operators are disallowed and reconstruction is forced, e.g. in raising relative clauses (e.g. amount and free relatives: Bianchi 2004). In such cases, BrE *do* is prohibited, just like with *wh*-extraction:

(9) a. I put in my pocket all the money I could (??do).

b. He buys what he can (*do).

Thus, the presence of a copy (rather than an operator) seems to be the relevant factor, not reconstruction specifically. Regarding the A-dependencies in (7)-(8), Lasnik (1999) and Fox (1999) claim that A-movement which doesn’t reconstruct fails to leave behind lower copies (is “traceless”), so the pattern is extended in such cases as well: no copy means BrE *do* is available.

Thus, we claim that BrE *do* isn’t allergic to reconstruction, despite initial appearances. Instead, it’s allergic to copy-based movement (which reconstructs), but compatible with operator-based dependencies (which don’t). The [Spec, *vP*] position plays a crucial role, in its guise as a phase edge (and thus an escape hatch for movement): when it contains a copy of some higher moved element, BrE *do* is blocked; when it contains a null operator (or nothing at all), BrE *do* is possible.

