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 reproba... 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 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.
We argue that this pattern follows from a component of Haddican’s (2008) analysis of BrE do, namely that it is a little-\(v\) clitic that requires a verbal host to lean on to its left. For example, it can’t be stressed (indicated with SMALL CAPS: (10)); it can’t be separated from the preceding verbal head by interveners (11); it can’t be stranded by T-to-C of its host (12); and, it can’t take another clitic (i.e. a contracted auxiliary) as a host (13):

(10) A: Do you think you'll arrive on time?
   a. B: I MIGHT do.

(11) a. *I don’t know if she’ll come, but she should obviously do.
   b. *I don’t know if she’ll come, but she should, it seems, do.

(12) *I know Maria will come, but will your brother do?

(13) a. *Sarah will arrive on time, and Tom’ll do too.
   b. Sarah will arrive on time, and Tom will do too.

Given the clitic status of do, we propose that the apparent sensitivity of BrE do to reconstruction in fact reflects its (in)ability to cliticise across material in [Spec, \(vP\)]. Specifically, if an XP in [Spec, \(vP\)] has phonological content in its lexical entry, it will block do. On the other hand, if that XP is lexically specified as silent/null, do can cliticise across it. (We assume with Lasnik & Saito 1992 that the A-dependency between the subject in [Spec, TP] and [Spec, \(vP\)] may be derived by raising or control, with only raising allowing reconstruction and control being required in examples like (1) where do incorporates.)

(14) a. ... aux SPEC do
   b. ... aux \(\text{PRO/OP}\) do

\text{Cliticization blocked by overt Spec, e.g. (2)}

Cliticization possible across null-OP or \(\text{PRO, e.g. (4)-(5)}\)

Thus, the grammar seems to exhibit a sensitivity to derived silence (deleted copies of moved XPs) versus lexically-specified silence (null operators, \(\text{PRO, etc.}\)). This is highly reminiscent of Chomsky’s (1977) influential analysis of wanna-contraction: “traces” of movement (\(\text{qua deleted copies}\)) interfere with PF processes, but null categories do not.

Finally, we show that this can receive a principled explanation in terms of the ordering of operations in the postsyntactic component. Assume that the cliticization of do as in (14b) is done by a rule of prosodic incorporation in the postsyntactic component, taking place after linearization and vocabulary insertion; this is a rebracketing rule which groups weak unstressed elements with a stress-bearing element, and which feeds sandhi rules and which cannot ‘skip’ intervening material (Selkirk 1984, Hayes 1989). Indirect evidence for the lateness of prosodic incorporation comes from the fact that it is sensitive to the assignment of sentence stress (cf Zwicky 1982 on infinitival \(\text{to}\)). Assume furthermore that PF-deletion – ellipsis and copy deletion – is even later in the postsyntactic component, occurring after prosodic incorporation (cf. Bennett et al 2015 on Irish pronoun incorporation and ellipsis) and other phonological processes (cf. Murphy 2015 on the interaction of downstep deletion and copy deletion in Kikuyu). With these assumptions in place, the difference between (14a) and (14b) follows: copies of movement will get in the way of prosodic incorporation of do into the preceding aux because copies aren’t deleted until very late, but when the element between the aux and do is a null formant (PRO/OP) then it will not intervene.

Selected references:
Bennett, Ryan, Emily Elfner and James McCloskey, 2015. Prosody, focus and ellipsis in Irish. Ms.