

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359286603>

ELLIPSIS IN THE 21ST CENTURY ENGLISH SLANG

Article in *International Humanitarian University Herald Philology* · January 2021

DOI: 10.32841/2409-1154.2021.52-1.4

CITATION

1

READS

49

1 author:



Dmytro Borys

Kyiv National Linguistic University

13 PUBLICATIONS 18 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Borys D. P.,

PhD in Philology,

Associate Professor at Department of English Philology
Kyiv National Linguistic UniversityELLIPSIS IN THE 21ST CENTURY ENGLISH SLANG

Summary. The present article focuses on investigating the phenomenon of ellipsis as a productive mechanism of syntactic derivation in the 21st c. English slang. Ellipsis is characterized by the deletion of a certain structurally and semantically autonomous element (or elements) of a compound lexeme, phrase, or proposeme with the condensation of the original meaning in the remaining constituent. As the primary focus of the article bears on the 21st century slang, three English slang dictionaries are chosen as the research database of neologisms, namely “The concise new Partridge dictionary of slang and unconventional English” (2008), “Vice slang” (2008), and “The Routledge dictionary of modern American slang and unconventional English” (2009). Elliptical neologisms in the 21st c. English slang are found to derive predominantly from both free and bound phrases (97.7% of the items) as well as, to a much lesser extent, proposemes (2.3% of the items). The bulk of the material under analysis is made up of dephrasal elliptical slang neologisms deriving from bound verbal phrases (47.1% of the items) and free substantival phrases (42.5% of the items). Dephrasal elliptical slang neologisms deriving from bound verbal phrases are formed in accordance with one of the two patterns: *verbal phrase* → [*constituent*] *verb* or *verbal phrase* → [*constituent*] *noun*. Dephrasal elliptical slang neologisms deriving from free substantival phrases may follow one of the four patterns: *adjective+noun* → *adjective, noun¹+noun²* → *noun¹, noun¹+noun²* → *noun²*, or *numeral+noun* → *numeral*. The ontological semantic difference between lexemes and proposemes accounts for the minute number of deproposemic elliptical slang neologisms (2.3% of the items), which manifests itself in the structural coincidence of the resulting elided proposeme with a lexeme. The overwhelming majority (94.2%) of the items under investigation fully condense the meaning of the derivational base. The formation of 5.8% of the slang neologisms, however, is characterized by semantic shifts, based on expansion of meaning, metaphorization, metonymization and metaphonymization.

Key words: ellipsis, dephrasal ellipsis, deproposemic ellipsis, English slang, slang neologism.

Introduction. Redundancy is typical of all natural languages and can, therefore, be rightfully regarded as a linguistic universal. It is aimed at compressing information, i.e., semantically speaking, encasing the meaning (in the form of a notion, concept, or utterance) originally conveyed by a more complex and/or extended form in a simpler and/or more concise form. Lexical redundancy as a specific case of linguistic redundancy incorporates a wide range of processes which may affect the structure of either a word (as in the case of back formation, clipping, and suffixed clipping) or a superordinate unit – a free/bound phrase or a proposeme (as in the case of acronyms, blending, and ellipsis). In either case, the deletion of a segment of the original form, no matter whether subverbal, verbal, or superverbal, does not entail the loss

of the original meaning, albeit occasional semantic shifts are not impossible. If the retained segment constitutes a word or a phrase deriving from a superordinate unit, i.e. a compound word/a phrase or a more complex phrase/a sentence respectively, the mechanism involved is known as ellipsis.

Ellipsis is a multifaceted phenomenon that has been aptly dubbed “the consummate crowd-pleaser” [1, p. 1] by K. Johnson, which reflects the fact that it may be investigated within diverse frameworks: syntactic [2; 3; 4]; rhetorical [5; 6]; stylistic [7]; prosodic [8]. According to M. Z. Kurdi, ellipsis consists in ‘omitting a certain number of elements from an utterance without affecting its intelligibility’ [9, p. 142].

Depending on whether the interpretation of the missing element is recoverable or unrecoverable exclusively from context, two types of ellipsis [ibid.] can be singled out: situational, whose interpretation totally relies on context and roughly corresponds to the dependency-based theory of syntactic structure, and grammatical, where the implicit form and meaning are deducible from the syntactic fabric of a specific language in accordance with the constituency-based theory of syntactic structure. As situational ellipsis is restricted to a peculiar communicative situation and thus inconceivable beyond discourse, it is of no interest to the present article which centers on the predominantly lexical phenomenon of slang viewed derivationally and not functionally. Therefore, it is on grammatical ellipsis that I would like to focus my attention in this study.

However, a purely grammatical perspective on the phenomenon in question generally boils down to investigating either the syntactical status and correlations of miscellaneous forms of ellipsis (including but not limited to bare argument ellipsis (aka stripping), comparative deletion, gapping, pseudogapping, right node raising, sluicing, verb phrase ellipsis, etc. [1; 10]), or the algorithms underlying the syntactic and/or semantic recoverability of the deleted element. In either case, it is the sentence that serves as the point of departure. The focus of the present article, however, bears on identifying those multiword slang items (predominantly, phrases) whose structural reduction ultimately resulted in the coinage of novel forms condensing the original semantics. Hence, the approach adopted in my study is syntactic-derivational, i.e. integrated.

The purpose of the article is threefold. Firstly, my aim is to identify all the patterns of syntactic derivation accounting for the formation of elliptical neologisms in the 21st century English slang. Secondly, the patterns delimited are to be classified according to their syntactic status and structure, and arranged with respect to their productivity level. Thirdly, it is essential to deduce the semantic and derivational regularities, if any, involved in the formation of the slang neologisms under study.

The database of the research is 87 elided forms. The items under study constitute a selection from three English slang

dictionaries: “The concise new Partridge dictionary of slang and unconventional English” (2008), “Vice slang” (2008), and “The Routledge dictionary of modern American slang and unconventional English” (2009).

Methodology. The key characteristics of elliptical items include:

- 1) availability of a full (unelided) correlate in the form of a free/bound phrase or a proposeme in contemporary language;
- 2) implicitness of a structurally required deleted element of the original phrase;
- 3) recoverability of the deleted element based on immediate context [11, p. 102; 12, p. 7].

With the above in mind, the present study of elliptical slang neologisms is premised on the use of transformational analysis. This technique relies on opposing pairs of semantically identical units according to the criterion of “invariance (the original unit – derivational base – is a complete structurally explicit phrase/proposeme) → variance (the resulting unit – syntactic derivative – is an incomplete structurally implicit phrase/proposeme)”. For instance, the decomposition of the bound phrase *blonde marijuana* ‘golden-leaved marijuana’, both of whose components retain their semantic autonomy, results in the formation of the neologism *blonde* ‘golden-leaved marijuana’ [13, p. 67]. The coined word is structurally defective due to the loss of its head *marijuana* and semantically opaque due to the condensation of the original phrase meaning in its dependent *blonde*.

In the present study, ellipsis is analyzed both structurally and semantically. Structurally, it is approached from the perspective of the nominative or predicative relationships existing between the components of a free/bound phrase or a proposeme respectively. Semantically, ellipsis consists in transferring a meaning from one language item to the other which is associated to it within a certain stable syntagm [14, p. 591].

Results and discussion. According to the linguistic status of the derivational bases identified, the elliptical slang neologisms under study are divided into **dephrasal** and **deproposemic**.

Dephrasal elliptical slang neologisms

The **dephrasal elliptical slang neologisms** (85 items, or 97.7% of the items under analysis) derive from phrases that have lost one or more structurally and semantically autonomous components with the complete or quasi-complete condensation of the original meaning in the resulting lexeme. Both free and bound phrases are found to serve as derivational bases.

The **dephrasal elliptical slang neologisms deriving from free phrases** constitute 38 items. The overwhelming majority of these neologisms are formed through deletion of a structurally and semantically autonomous component in a substantival phrase (37 items). Conversely, verbal phrases have contributed only as few as 1 neologism to the early 21st c. English slang stock.

The **dephrasal elliptical slang neologisms deriving from free substantival phrases** are found to be formed according to one of the four patterns: *adjective+noun* → *adjective* (20 items), *noun¹+noun²* → *noun¹* (15 items), *noun¹+noun²* → *noun²* (1 item), or *numeral+noun* → *numeral* (1 item).

In the first pattern *adjective+noun* → *adjective*, it is always the second – head – substantival component that is elided, which leads to the condensation of the original meaning in the first – dependent – adjective, as in *Hawaiian* ‘very potent marijuana cultivated in Hawaii’ [13, p. 325] (derivational base

Hawaiian marijuana); *joint* ‘a hip-hop recording that features more than one leading rapper’ [15, p. 574] (derivational base *joint recording*); *regular* ‘a skateboarder who skates with the left foot to the front’ [13, p. 536] (derivational base *regular-footed skateboarder*); *technical* ‘in foot-powered scootering, any trick that is performed on a flat surface or ledge and requires a good deal of technical skill’ [13, p. 643] (derivational base *technical trick*).

The second pattern *noun¹+noun²* → *noun¹* is similarly characterized by the deletion of the second – head – substantival component, while the first noun originally performing the function of a modifier encapsulates the meaning of the whole phrase, as in *cheesecutter* ‘a wedge-shaped hat’ [13, p. 131] (derivational base *cheesecutter cap*); *China / china* ‘heroin’ [13, p. 135] (derivational base *China white*); *Crown* ‘a Crown Prosecutor’ [13, p. 175] (derivational base *Crown Prosecutor*).

The third pattern *noun¹+noun²* → *noun²*, in which the meaning is condensed in the second – head – component, has contributed only 1 neologism to English slang: *dew* ‘rum that has been manufactured illegally’ [13, p. 196] (derivational base *mountain dew*).

Finally, the fourth pattern *numeral+noun* → *numeral* is based on the loss of the second – head – substantival component, the original semantics being retained by the first – dependent – numeral: *five* ‘five pounds’ (derivational base *five pounds*) [13, p. 253].

The single **dephrasal elliptical slang neologism deriving from a free verbal phrase** identified in the present research conforms to the pattern *verb+nominal phrase* → *verb*: *start* ‘to start one’s menstrual period’ [13, p. 617] (derivational base *to start one’s menstrual period*). This instance of decomposition is characterized by the retention of the verbal head, whereas the phrase dependent is deleted.

The **dephrasal elliptical slang neologisms deriving from bound phrases** constitute 48 items. The vast majority of coinages belonging to this group (41 items) are based on verbal phrases. The remaining 7 items result from elided substantival (6) or adjectival (1) phrases.

The **dephrasal elliptical slang neologisms deriving from bound verbal phrases** are found to retain either the phrase head or the phrase dependent. In the former case, the original meaning is condensed in the verbal phrase head following the pattern *verbal phrase* → *[constituent] verb*, as in *hammer* ‘to stretch physical limits’ [13, p. 317] (derivational base *hammer away*); *head* ‘to leave’ [13, p. 326] (derivational base *head off*); *tickle* ‘to prime an engine’ [13, p. 651] (derivational base *tickle the pot* ‘(sl.) to prime an engine’). In the latter case, it is the substantival phrase dependent that retains the original semantics in compliance with the pattern *verbal phrase* → *[constituent] noun*, as in *bliksem* ‘to smack, punch or beat up’ [13, p. 65] (derivational base *to donner the bliksem* [out of sb] ‘(sl.) to beat the lights [out of sb]’); *egg* ‘to perform poorly’ [13, p. 232] (derivational base *to lay an egg*). Although the meaningful phrase dependent is fully preserved in the neologisms provided, one example results from the retention of only one autonomous constituent of the dependent: *large* ‘to live an extreme and hedonistic lifestyle to its fullest extent’ [13, p. 392] (derivational base *to give / have it large*).

Similarly, the **dephrasal elliptical slang neologisms deriving from bound substantival phrases** result from the retention of either the phrase head or the phrase dependent, which incorporate the original meaning. The substantival head is preserved in 3 items: *the nuts* ‘excellent, outstanding, very impressive’ [13, p. 466]

(derivational base *mutt's nuts* '(sl.) anything considered to be the finest, the most excellent, the best'); *monty* 'everything required within a given context' [13, p. 438] (derivational base *the full monty*); *the turkey* 'an act of withdrawing from addictive drugs; the time period of that withdrawal' [13, p. 670] (derivational base *cold turkey*). An equal number of the neologisms is based on the retention of the adjectival (a) or substantival (b) dependent:

(a) *blunt* 'a reporter' [13, p. 72] (derivational base *blunt nib* '(sl.) a reporter'); *lunar* 'the bleed period of the menstrual cycle' [13, p. 412] (derivational base *lunar occurrence* '(sl.) the bleed period of the menstrual cycle');

(b) *doughnut* 'a fool, a crazy person' [13, p. 216] (derivational base *doughnut head* '(sl.) a fool, a crazy person').

The only **dephrasal elliptical slang neologism deriving from a bound adjectival phrase** is formed according to the pattern *noun+adjective* → *noun*: *jelly* 'excellent' [13, p. 365] (derivational base *jelly tight*). In this case, the original meaning is condensed in the dependent noun, the adjectival phrase head being omitted.

As far as the semantic characteristics of the dephrasal elliptical slang neologisms under study are concerned, the original meanings of the derivational base phrases are fully preserved in the overwhelming majority (80 out of 85) of the derivatives. However, the research material contains 5 lexemes which, apart from decomposition, have equally undergone a shift of meaning. **Expansion of meaning** is identified in 2 items: *rude* 'a youth who steals by mugging' [13, p. 551] (derivational base *rude b(w)oy* 'a Jamaican youth associated with gang activities'); *wet* 'a conventional cigarette infused with embalming fluid' [16, p. 198] (derivational base *wet cigarette* 'a conventional cigarette infused with phencyclidine'). **Metaphorization** as transfer of meaning based on similarity has contributed 1 neologism to the 21st c. English slang stock: *poke* 'marijuana' [13, p. 505] (derivational base *pokeweed* '*Phytolacca americana*, a strong-smelling shrub native to North America'). **Metonymization** as transfer of meaning based on contiguity is found in the lexeme *ends* 'the hair' [13, p. 236] (derivational base *split ends* 'tips of a person's hair which have split from dryness or ill-treatment'). A combination of metaphorization and metonymization in the form of **metaphonymization** as transfer of meaning based on both similarity and contiguity underlies the formation of the neologism *froth* 'to engage in an abusive verbal attack' [13, p. 272] (derivational base *froth at the mouth* 'to be extremely angry').

Deproposemic elliptical slang neologisms

Deproposemic elliptical slang neologisms (2 items, or 2.3% of the items under analysis) derive from sentences that have lost one or more structurally and semantically autonomous components with the complete or quasi-complete condensation of the original meaning in the resulting lexeme.

The slang neologisms included in this group are all lexemes deriving from proposemes. Although the elliptization of the latter can also result in the formation of elliptical proposemes or phrasemes, such instances are not addressed in the present paper, which has to do with the predominantly lexicocentric understanding of neologisms [17, p. 58]. As a result, this study does not focus on novel slang proverbs and sayings such as *ain't no shame in my game* 'used for expressing a lack of shame when engaged in an activity that might shame others' [15, p. 9] (derivational base *there ain't no shame in my game*) or *been there, done that, bought the tee-shirt!* 'used as a laconic, world-weary dismissal of another's suggestion'

[13, p. 45] (derivational base *I've been there, I've done that, I've bought the tee-shirt!*).

The 2 deproposemic elliptical neologisms identified in the 21st c. English slang are *believe* 'used for registering agreement' [13, p. 46] (derivational base *I believe you*) and *easy* 'used as a greeting' [13, p. 230] (derivational base *at ease, gentlemen*). The minute quantity of neologisms attributable to this group is due to the fundamental semasiological difference between the lexeme and the proposeme: the former is characterized by nominativeness and denotes concepts, whereas the latter is characterized by predicativeness, which serves to express judgments [18, p. 250]. Therefore, when the structurally and semantically autonomous components of the proposeme are deleted, the condensation of its meaning in the lexeme contradicts the very nature of the latter. The key functions of the lexeme consist in naming objects, qualities, states, and actions; yet, it does not correlate the meaning expressed with reality, i.e. does not possess predicativeness. Furthermore, the lexeme proves prototypically incapable of expressing an opinion which confirms or denies information about objective reality, i.e. it does not convey judgments. The first slang neologism *believe* constitutes a structural coincidence of a lexeme and an elliptical sentence with both the subject (*I*) and the object (*you*) removed. The second example, *easy*, results from the desemantization of the original proposeme *at ease, gentlemen*, whose components have lost their proper meanings, turning into a greeting formula.

Conclusions. Ellipsis is a form of syntactic derivation characterized by the deletion of a certain structurally and semantically autonomous element (or elements) of a compound word, phrase, or proposeme with the condensation of the original meaning in the remaining constituent. Elliptical neologisms in the 21st c. English slang derive predominantly from both free and bound phrases (97.7% of the items) as well as, to a much lesser extent, proposemes (2.3% of the items). The bulk of the material under analysis is made up of dephrasal elliptical slang neologisms deriving from bound verbal phrases (47.1% of the items) and free substantival phrases (42.5% of the items). The ontological semantic difference between lexemes and proposemes accounts for the minute number of deproposemic elliptical slang neologisms (2.3% of the items), which manifests itself in the structural coincidence of the resulting ellided proposeme with a lexeme. The overwhelming majority (94.2%) of the items under investigation fully condense the meaning of the derivational base. The formation of 5.8% of the slang neologisms, however, is characterized by semantic shifts, based on expansion of meaning, metaphorization, metonymization and metaphonymization.

Further synchronic studies focusing on neologisms from other periods in English as well as in other languages will need to be undertaken to enhance our understanding of ellipsis from derivational, syntactical, and semantic perspectives.

References:

1. Johnson K. Introduction. *Topics in ellipsis* / Ed. K. Johnson. Cambridge/New York : Cambridge University Press, 2008. P. 1–14.
2. Aelbrecht L. The syntactic licensing of ellipsis. Amsterdam/Philadelphia : John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010. 230 p.
3. Lobeck A. Ellipsis: Functional heads, licensing, and identification. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. 210 p.
4. Craenenbroeck J. van. The syntax of ellipsis: Evidence from Dutch dialects. Oxford/New York : Oxford University Press, 2010. 315 p.
5. Hamilton J.T. *Philology of the flesh*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018. 239 p.

6. Saiber A. *Giordano Bruno and the geometry of language*. Burlington: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2005. 200 p.
7. Wilson P. *Mind the gap: Ellipsis and stylistic variation in spoken and written English*. London: Routledge, 2000. 252 p.
8. Carlson K., Horn L. *Parallelism and prosody in the processing of ellipsis sentences*. New York/London : Routledge, 2002. 244 p.
9. Kurdi M.Z. *Natural language processing and computational linguistics 2: Semantics, discourse and applications*. London : ISTE Ltd. & Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2017. 316 p.
10. Merchant J. *Ellipsis: A survey of analytical approaches*. *The Oxford handbook of ellipsis* / Eds. J. van Craenenbroeck & T. Temmerman. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2019. P. 19–45.
11. Зеликов М.В. Эллиптические модели в языках Испании. *Вопросы языкознания*. 1994. № 1. С. 100–113.
12. Морозова Е.И. Структурно-функциональные типы и прагматические характеристики эллипсиса во французском языке в сопоставлении с английским (на материале газетно-журнальных публикаций) : автореф. дисс. ... канд. филол. наук : 10.02.20. Екатеринбург, 2005. 23 с.
13. Dalzell T., Victor. T. *The concise new Partridge dictionary of slang and unconventional English*. London/New York : Routledge, 2008. 721 p.
14. Українська мова : енциклопедія / редкол. : В.М. Русанівський (співголова), О.О. Тараненко (співголова), М.П. Зяблюк та ін. Київ : Українська енциклопедія імені М.П. Бажана, 2004. 824 с.
15. Dalzell T. *The Routledge dictionary of modern American slang and unconventional English*. New York/London : Routledge, 2009. 1104 p.
16. Dalzell T., Victor. T. *Vice slang*. London/New York: Routledge, 2008. 206 p.
17. Борис Д.П. Проблема неоднозначності поняття «неологізм» кризь призму лінгвофілософської теорії. *Науковий вісник Дрогобицького державного педагогічного університету імені Івана Франка. Серія «Філологічні науки (мовознавство)»*. 2015. № 3. С. 54–61.
18. Кочерган М.П. Загальне мовознавство. Київ : Академія, 2006. 464 с.

Борис Д. Еліпсис у сленгу англійської мови початку ХХІ століття

Анотація. Стаття присвячена проблемі дослідження явища еліпсису, який постає продуктивним способом

синтаксичного словотвору в сленгу англійської мови початку ХХІ століття. Еліпсис характеризується вилученням певного структурно й семантично самостійного елемента (або елементів) композита, словосполучення або речення з конденсацією вихідного значення в кінцевому фрагменті. Оскільки основний акцент у статті зроблено на сленгу початку ХХІ століття, базою даних дослідження було обрано три тлумачні словники сленгу англійської мови, зокрема “The concise new Partridge dictionary of slang and unconventional English” (2008), “Vice slang” (2008) і “The Routledge dictionary of modern American slang and unconventional English” (2009). Виявлено, що еліптичні неологізми сленгу англійської мови початку ХХІ століття переважно творяться від вільних і сталих словосполучень (97,7% одиниць), а також значно меншою мірою від пропозем (2,3% одиниць). Більшість аналізованих неологізмів становлять дефразові еліптичні неосленгізми, які походять від сталих дієслівних (47,1% одиниць) і вільних іменникових (42,5% одиниць) словосполучень. Дефразові еліптичні неосленгізми, які походять від сталих дієслівних словосполучень, утворюються за однією з двох моделей: *дієслівне словосполучення* → [голове] *дієслово* або *дієслівне словосполучення* → [підрядний] *іменник*. Дефразові еліптичні неосленгізми, які походять від вільних іменникових словосполучень, співвідносяться з однією з чотирьох моделей: *прикметник+іменник* → *прикметник*, *іменник¹+іменник²* → *іменник¹*, *іменник¹+іменник²* → *іменник²* або *числівник+іменник* → *числівник*. Онтологічна семантична відмінність між лексемами та пропозиціями пояснює мізерну кількість депропоземних еліптичних неосленгізмів (2,3% одиниць), що знаходять відображення в структурному збігу кінцевої неповної пропозиції з лексемою. Більшість (94,2%) досліджуваних одиниць повністю конденсують значення вихідної основи. Водночас творення 5,8% неосленгізмів характеризується семантичними зсувами, які ґрунтуються на розширенні значення, метафоризації, метонімізації та метафтонімізації.

Ключові слова: еліпсис, дефразовий еліпсис, депропоземний еліпсис, сленг англійської мови, неосленгізм.