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Kasai, Gen

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Licensing VP Ellipsis in Japanese from a Viewpoint of Distributed Morphology*

GEN KASAI

The University of Osaka/JSPS Research Fellow

1 Introduction

Ellipsis has been one of the most debated topics in Generative Grammar because it is highly likely to reflect what Language Faculty (UG) is. It is observed in many languages though children are not exposed to any overt linguistic evidence to acquire it. This paper explores what human inherent linguistic ability is by investigating licensing condition of ellipsis from Japanese (innate to UG) and argues that Morphology in the framework of Distributed Morphology (Halle and Marantz 1993) plays an important role in licensing ellipsis as well as Syntax and Semantics. In Japanese, VP ellipsis with native Japanese verbs (NJV) is generally prohibited, as in (1) and (2). (1) shows

- (1) a. Hiroshi-wa nantoka LA keiyude Nihon-he kaetta kedo,
H.-TOP managed.to LA via Japan-to return
'Although Hiroshi managed to go back to Japan via LA,...'
b. *Mary-wa [_{VP}Δ] sinakatta.
Mary-TOP did.not
'Mary didn't'

(Fujii 2016)

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that ellipsis of VP with NJV stranding *s* ‘do’ is disallowed (Hinds 1973; Kuno 1978). On the other hand, (2) indicates that verb stranding VP ellipsis (VSVPE) is also prohibited (Oku 1998). The oddness of (2-b) stems from unavailability of the adjunct VSVPE *nessinni* ‘hard’ (Oku 1998). (2-b) elides only the object NP. The first sentence meaning that Mary didn’t wash a car at all contradicts the second one that presupposes that Mary washed a car in (2-b). This argument is evidenced by the fact that the same contradiction occurs even if the object is not elided, as in (2-c). (2) exemplifies that VSVPE is prohibited in Japanese in general because VSVPE can elide VP including the adjunct *nessinni* ‘hard’ in (2) (adjunct inclusive (AI) reading), as schematized in (3).

- (2) a. Taro-wa [_{VP} *nessinni* *kuruma-o* *arat*]-ta ga,
 T.-TOP hard car-ACC wash-PST but
 ‘Taro washed a car hard, but’
 b. #Mary-wa [_{VP} Δ] *araw*₂-*anak*-atta. Mary-no *arat*-ta kuruma-ni-wa *yogore*-ga
 M.-TOP wash-NEG-PST M.-GEN wash-PST car-DAT-TOP dirt-NOM
nokotteita.
 remained
 ‘Mary didn’t wash a car. The car Mary washed was still dirty.’
 c. #Mary-wa [_{NP} *kuruma-o*] *araw*-*anak*-atta. Mary-no *arat*-ta kuruma-ni-wa
 M.-TOP car-ACC wash-NEG-PST M.-GEN wash-PST car-DAT-TOP
yogore-ga *nokotteita*.
 dirt-NOM remained
 ‘Mary didn’t wash a car. The car Mary washed was still dirty.’
 (3) Subj [_{VP} ~~Adjunct~~ ~~Obj~~ *t*_T] V₁-T (verb stranding VP ellipsis)

The adjunct will improve the weirdness of (2-b) because the first sentence does not entail Mary did not wash a car, consistent with the following clause. In fact, there is no oddness if the adjunct is overtly expressed, as (4) shows.

- (4) a. Taro-wa [_{VP} *nessinni* *kuruma-o* *arat*]-ta ga,
 T.-TOP hard car-ACC wash-PST but
 ‘Taro washed a car hard, but’
 b. Mary-wa [_{VP} *nessinni* *kuruma-o*] *araw*-*anak*-atta. Mary-no *arat*-ta
 M.-TOP hard car-ACC wash-NEG-PST M.-GEN wash-PST
kuruma-ni-wa *yogore*-ga *nokotteita*.
 car-DAT-TOP dirt-NOM remained
 ‘Mary didn’t wash a car carefully. The car Mary washed was still dirty.’

However, apparent VSVPE is shown to be available with some native Japanese verbs such as the main verb, *s* ‘do’ and its potential and honorific suppletive forms, *deki* ‘pot.do’ and *nasar* ‘hon.do’ ($\sqrt{\text{DO}}$ type native Japanese verb, $\sqrt{\text{DO}}$ type NJV). I will resolve the issue by adopting Distributed Morphology and proposing morphological licensing condition of ellipsis. This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 observes that $\sqrt{\text{DO}}$ type NJV permits AI reading. Section 3 claims that the hitherto unnoticed data can be captured by the proposal that ellipsis is licensed iff the licensing

head cannot see any phonological exponents of Root in the framework of Distributed Morphology. In Section 4, the condition is applied to particle-attached VP ellipsis (Fujii 2016; Funakoshi 2020), Sino-Japanese VP ellipsis (Hayashi 2015), and vP ellipsis in English (Merchant 2013). Section 5 shows that PF deletion is supported as an ellipsis strategy rather than no insertion hypothesis of ellipsis. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2 $\sqrt{\text{DO}}$ type NJV and AI Reading

It is shown in this section that Japanese owns VSVPE if VP is headed by $\sqrt{\text{DO}}$ type NJV. As mentioned in Section 1, ellipsis of VP with a native Japanese verb is in general prohibited. As well as deletion of VP with *s* stranded in (1), verb stranding VP ellipsis (VSVPE) is also banned (Oku 1998), as in (2). Nevertheless, some native Japanese verbs such as the main verb, *s* ‘do’ and its potential and honorific suppletive forms, *deki* ‘POT.do’ and *nasar* ‘HON.do’ ($\sqrt{\text{DO}}$ type native Japanese verb, $\sqrt{\text{DO}}$ type NJV) allow a gap preceding a verb to include the manner adjunct, as shown in (5), (6), and (7). The preceding sentences in (5-b), (6-b), and (7-b) avoid contradiction with the second sentences in these examples in the same way as the (d) sentences including the adjuncts as well as the objects. In contrast, (5-c), (6-c), and (7-c) containing only the objects in the VPs cause pragmatic implausibility due to the impossibility of deleting the adjunct alone (Oku 1998).

- (5) a. Taro-wa [_{VP} nessinni supootsu-o si]-ta ga,
T.-TOP hard sport-ACC do-PST but
‘Taro played sports hard, but’
b. Mary-wa [_{VP} Δ] si-nak-atta. Mary-no puree-wa yoku-nak-atta.
M.-TOP do-NEG-PST M.-GEN play-TOP good-NEG-PST
‘Mary didn’t. The play Mary did was not good.’
c. #Mary-wa [_{NP} supootsu-o] si-nak-atta. Mary-no puree-wa yoku-nak-atta.
M.-TOP support-ACC do-NEG-PST M.-GEN play-TOP good-NEG-PST
‘Mary didn’t play sports. The play Mary did was not good.’
d. Mary-wa [_{VP} nessinni supootsu-o] si-nak-atta. Mary-no puree-wa
M.-TOP hard sport-ACC do-NEG-PST M.-GEN play-TOP
yoku-nak-atta.
good-NEG-PST
‘Mary didn’t play sports hard. The play Mary did was not good.’
- (6) a. Taro-wa [_{VP} sono koro nessinni supootsu-ga deki]-ta ga,
T.-TOP that time hard sport-NOM POT.do-PST but
‘Taro could play sports hard then, but’
b. Mary-wa [_{VP} Δ] deki-nak-atta. Mary-ni supootsu-ga
M.-TOP POT.do-NEG-PST M.-DAT sport-NOM
dekita-no-wa shuu-ni ikkai-dake datta.
POT.do-PST-NML-TOP week-in once-only was
‘Mary couldn’t. It is only once a week that Mary could do it.’

- c. #Mary-wa [_{NP} supootsu-ga] deki-nak-atta. Mary-ni supootsu-ga
 M.-TOP sport-NOM POT.do-NEG-PST M.-DAT sport-NOM
 dekita-no-wa shuu-ni ikkai-dake datta.
 POT.do-PST-NML-TOP week-in once-only was
 ‘Mary couldn’t play sports. It is only once a week that Mary could do it.’
- d. Mary-wa [_{VP} nessinni supootsu-ga] deki-nak-atta. Mary-ni supootsu-ga
 M.-TOP hard sport-NOM POT.do-NEG-PST M.-DAT sport-NOM
 dekita-no-wa shuu-ni ikkai-dake datta.
 POT.do-PST-NML-TOP week-in once-only was
 ‘Mary couldn’t play sports hard. It is only once a week that Mary could do it.’
- (7) a. Yamada sensei-wa [_{VP} nessinni supootsu-o nasat]-ta ga,
 Y. professor-TOP hard sport-ACC do.HON-PST but
 ‘Prof.Yamada played sports hard, but’
- b. Tanaka sensei-wa [_{VP} Δ] nasar-anak-atta. Tanaka sensei-no
 T. professor-TOP do.HON-NEG-PST T. professor-GEN
 puree-wa yoku-nak-atta.
 play-TOP good-NEG-PST
 ‘Prof.Tanaka₁ didn’t. The play he₁ did was not good.’
- c. #Tanaka sensei-wa [_{NP} supootsu-o] nasar-anak-atta. Tanaka
 T. professor-TOP sports-ACC do.HON-NEG-PST T.
 sensei-no puree-wa yoku-nak-atta.
 professor-GEN play-TOP good-NEG-PST
 ‘Prof.Tanaka₁ didn’t play sports. The play he₁ did was not good.’
- d. Tanaka sensei-wa [_{VP} nessinni supootsu-o] nasar-anak-atta. Tanaka
 T. professor-TOP hard sport-ACC do.HON-NEG-PST T.
 sensei-no puree-wa yoku-nak-atta.
 professor-GEN play-TOP good-NEG-PST
 ‘Prof.Tanaka₁ didn’t play sports hard. The play he₁ did was not good.’

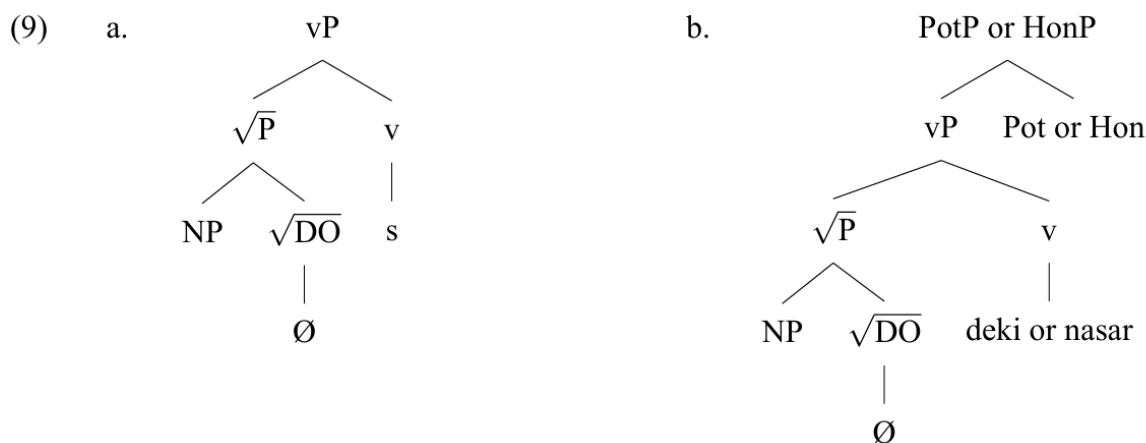
These facts indicate that a $\sqrt{\text{DO}}$ type NJV permits apparent VSVPE whereas the other native Japanese verbs cannot.

3 Proposal: Morphological Licensing of Ellipsis

The asymmetry of VP ellipsis between a $\sqrt{\text{DO}}$ type NJV and the other native Japanese verb is explained by the licensing condition of ellipsis proposed here in tandem with Distributed Morphology (Halle and Marantz 1993). I propose (8) as a licensing condition of ellipsis from a morphological point of view. I also adopt the view that VP ellipsis in Japanese is v complement ellipsis (Kasai 2025) and the licensing head is v (Kasai 2025) (cf. British English in Aelbrecht (2010) and Korean in Park (2025)).

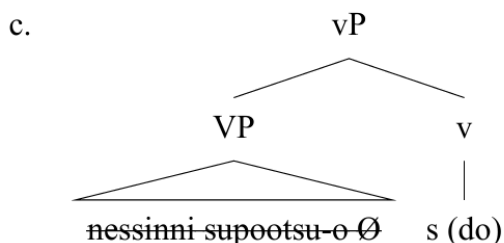
- (8) Ellipsis is licensed iff the licensing head is not adjacent to the phonologically overt Root.

In addition, it is assumed that the light verb, *s* ‘do’, occupies *v* which selects $\sqrt{P}$ headed by $\sqrt{DO}$ and $\sqrt{DO}$ itself lacks its own phonological features, following Tagawa (2009), as shown in (9-a). In addition, *deki* ‘POT.do’ and *nasar* ‘HON.do’ are contextual allomorphy of $\sqrt{DO}$ (Oseki and Tagawa 2019) and the phonological exponents are realized in *v* when Pot or Hon head appear in the structure, as in (9-b).



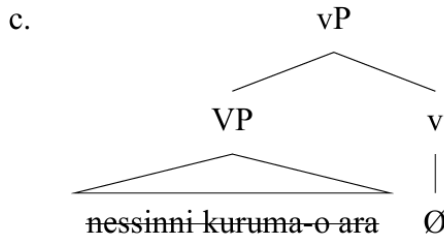
Coupled with the assumptions, (8) allows $\sqrt{DO}$ type NJVs to delete VP ($\sqrt{P}$), as (10) indicates. The VP in (10) including the adjunct, *nessinni* ‘hard’, undergoes phonological deletion with *s* in *v* stranded. (10) satisfies (8) because *v* is adjacent to phonologically null Root in this case, as exemplified in (9).

- (10) a. Taro-wa [_{VP} *nessinni supootsu-o si*]-ta ga,
T.-TOP hard sport-ACC do-PST but
‘Taro played sports hard, but’
b. Mary-wa [_{VP} Δ] *si-nak-atta*. Mary-no puree-wa *yoku-nak-atta*.
M.-TOP do-NEG-PST M.-GEN play-TOP good-NEG-PST
‘Mary didn’t. The play Mary did was not good.’



By contrast, VP with the other NJVs are not elided with the verb stranded, as in (11). (11) illustrates that the verb is included in the VP, which is a target for *v* complement ellipsis. (11) violates (8) because the adjacency relation between *v* and phonologically overt Root (*ara* ‘wash’ in (11)) holds.

- (11) a. Taro-wa [_{VP}nessinni kuruma-o arat]-ta ga,
 T.-TOP hard car-ACC wash-PST but
 ‘Taro washed a car hard, but’
 b. #Mary-wa [_{VP}Δ] araw-anak-atta. Mary-no arat-ta kuruma-ni-wa yogore-ga
 M.-TOP wash-NEG-PST M.-GEN wash-PST car-DAT-TOP dirt-NOM
 nokotteita.
 remained
 ‘Mary didn’t wash a car. The car Mary washed was still dirty.’



This section provides an explanation with why only $\sqrt{\text{DO}}$ type NJV renders VP ellipsis available in terms of morphological licensing condition of ellipsis based on Distributed Morphology. The next section attempts to extend (8) to particle-attached VP ellipsis (Fujii 2016; Funakoshi 2020), Sino-Japanese VP ellipsis (Hayashi 2015), and vP ellipsis in English (Merchant 2013).

4 Extension: Particle-attached VP Ellipsis, Sino-Japanese VP Ellipsis, and vP Ellipsis in English

Having described the (un)availability of VP ellipsis between $\sqrt{\text{DO}}$ type NJV and the other NJV, this section extends (8) for the other VP ellipsis phenomena in Japanese and English: particle attached VP ellipsis, Sino-Japanese VP ellipsis, and vP ellipsis in English. First, VP ellipsis is permitted with a focus particle even if VP is headed by NJV (particle-attached VP ellipsis, PAVPE), as in (12) (Fujii 2016; Funakoshi 2020; Sakamoto2021; Kasai2025). In (12), the topic particle *wa* ‘top’ permits VP ellipsis. The availability of VP (v complement) ellipsis naturally follows from (8) because the adjacency relation between v and the phonologically overt Root is interrupted by the particle.

- (12) a. Hiroshi-wa [_{VP} nantoka LA keiyude Nihon-he kaeri-wa] sita kedo,
 H.-TOP managed.to LA via Japan-to return-TOP did but
 ‘Hiroshi managed to go back to Japan via LA, but...’
 b. Mary-wa [_{VP}Δ] sinakatta.
 M.-TOP did.not.do
 ‘Mary didn’t.’

Next, the (un)availability of VP ellipsis with a Sino-Japanese verb (SJV) is easily captured by (8). Hayashi (2015) reports that VP ellipsis occurs if VP is headed by SJV, as exemplified in (13) (Sino-Japanese VP ellipsis, SJVPE). The SJV, *kanetu* ‘heat’, in (13) makes VP ellipsis possible.

- (13) a. Taro-wa [_{VP} furaipan-o kanentsu] si-ta ga,
 T.-TOP frying.pan-ACC heat do-PST but
 ‘Taro heated a frying pan, but’
 b. John-wa [_{VP}Δ] si-nak-atta.
 J.-TOP do-NEG-PST
 ‘John didn’t.’

However, it is not the case that all SJVs permit SJVPE. While (13) indicates that Long-form Sino-Japanese verbs (LFSJV) including *keiai* ‘respect’, *kanetu* ‘heat’, *giron* ‘discuss’, and *suisastu* ‘guess’ permit it, Short-form Sino-Japanese verbs (SFSJV) such as *ai* ‘love’, *nes* ‘heat’, *ron* ‘discuss’ and *sas* ‘guess’ do not, as in (14). (14-b) shows that SJVPE with *s* ‘do’ stranded is prevented by the SFSJV *nes* ‘heat’. In addition, verb stranding VP ellipsis is also impossible if the VP is headed by the SFSJV *nes*, as in (14-c).

- (14) a. Taro-wa [_{VP} sinchouni furaipan-o nes]-si-ta ga,
 T.-TOP carefully frying.pan-ACC heat-do-past but
 ‘Taro heated a frying pan carefully, but’
 b. *John-wa [_{VP}Δ] si-nak-atta. John-ga netu-o kuwaeta furaipan-wa
 J.-TOP do-NEG-PST J.-NOM heat-ACC added frying.pan-TOP
 kogetuiteita.
 was.charred
 ‘John didn’t. The frying pan that John heated was charred.’
 c. #John-wa [_{VP}Δ] nes-si-nak-atta. John-ga netu-o kuwaeta furaipan-wa
 J.-TOP heat-do-NEG-PST J.-NOM heat-ACC added frying.pan-TOP
 kogetuiteita.
 was.charred
 ‘John didn’t heat. The frying pan that John heated was charred.’(VSVPE)

The availability of SJVPE between LFSJV and SFSJV also follows from (8), assuming LFSJV constitute a phase domain stranding *v* while SFSJV does not (Tagawa 2009, 2015). An illustration is given in (15), which is based on (13). A phase head *F* selects RootP (VP) and VP and *v* are computed in separate phase domains in (15). The *v* is not adjacent to the LFSJV Root in PF due to the phase boundary, which respects (8). Thus, VP ellipsis is allowed with LFSJV.

- (15) LSJV: [_{VP} [_{FP} shinchoni furaipan-o kanentsu]-si] (Spell-out of FP)

On the other hand, SFSJV bans SJVPE because of the adjacency relation between *v* and the phonologically overt Root (the same structure as (11)).

Finally, the current analysis provides a clue with why English disallows ellipsis of VP. Merchant (2013) claims that the domain of VP ellipsis in English is vP rather than VP, as (16) shows.

(16) John likes tennis, but Mary does not $[_{VP}\Delta]/*[_{VP}\Delta]$.

One of the main reasons is that vP ellipsis in English does not tolerate valency mismatch, as in (17). The antecedent verb *freeze* is transitive whereas the verb in the ellipsis site have to be the intransitized counterpart in (17). Merchant (2013) ascribes the unacceptability of (17) to the hypothesis that vP headed by v (the locus of valency) is elided instead of VP in English and ellipsis requires featural syntactic identity. In other words, the syntactically featural mismatch between v_{Tr} and v_{Intr} degrades (17).

(17) *This can $[_{v_{Tr}(ansitive)P}[_{VP} freeze]]$. Please do $[_{v_{Intr}(ansitive)P}\Delta]$. (Merchant 2013)

However, his explanation is unsatisfactory because it is unclear why the target of ellipsis must not be VP. If this is possible, (17) is mistakenly overgenerated, as shown in (18). There is no featural mismatch because the culprit of mismatch (v) is excluded from the ellipsis site.

(18) This can $[_{v_{Tr}(ansitive)P}[_{VP} freeze]]$. Please do $[_{v_{Intr}(ansitive)P}[_{VP}\Delta]]$.

Luckily, (8) rules out ellipsis of VP in English in general, resolving the issue. Consider (18) again. Ellipsis of VP is not licensed by (8) because v is adjacent to the phonologically overt Root ($\sqrt{\text{FREEZE}}$).

This section illustrates that (8) can be applied to PAVPE, SJVPE, and vP Ellipsis in English. In the next section, the current analysis supports PF deletion theory of ellipsis instead of no insertion hypothesis of ellipsis as a consequence.

5 Theoretical Implication

This study verifies PF deletion literally deletes phonological features rather than hinders insertion of them by Vocabulary Insertion (Aelbrecht 2010; Merchant 2015). If I adopt Distributed Morphology, there are two logical possibilities for ellipsis strategies. One of them is to delete phonological features after Vocabulary Insertion (PF deletion). The other is to prevent Vocabulary Insertion (no insertion hypothesis of ellipsis, Aelbrecht 2010; Merchant 2015). I tacitly assume PF deletion because no insertion hypothesis of ellipsis overgenerates the unlicensed VP ellipsis discussed in this paper. Consider (19) illustrating the derivation of (11), the unlicensed case of VP ellipsis. (19-a) indicates that there are no phonological exponents in narrow syntax (NS). Crucially, no insertion hypothesis of ellipsis predicts that VP ellipsis is allowed in any case because there is no point in PF where phonological exponents for Vocabulary Items of the elided part are inserted, as shown in (19-b) ($\emptyset$ = no phonological exponents).

(19) a. NS: $[_{VP} [_{VP} adjunct Obj V]v]$
 b. PF: $[_{VP} [_{VP} \emptyset]v]$

In this case, the adjacency relation between *v* and the phonologically null Root holds, which mistakenly licenses VP ellipsis. On the other hand, PF deletion can circumvent the problem, as schematized in (20) (which is a PF deletion counterpart of (19)). After (20-a), phonological exponents of VP are given in (20-b) before deletion occurs in (20-c). In (20-b), VP ellipsis can undergo morphological licensing and is ruled out properly in this case (*v* is adjacent to the phonologically overt Root).

- (20) a. NS: [_{VP} [_{VP} adjunct Obj V]*v*]
 b. PF: [_{VP} [_{VP} nessinni kuruma-o ara]*v*]
 c. PF: [_{VP} [_{VP} ~~nessinni kuruma-o~~ ara]*v*]

This is why the current approach argues for PF deletion theory of ellipsis rather than no insertion hypothesis of ellipsis.

6 Conclusion

This section concludes this paper and discusses remaining issues. After introduction in Section 1, Section 2 points out that apparent VSVPE is possible with NJV if VP is headed by $\sqrt{\text{DO}}$ type NJV. Section 3 proposes morphological licensing condition of ellipsis and resolves the issues coupled with some assumptions that VP ellipsis in Japanese is *v* complement ellipsis licensed by *v* and $\sqrt{\text{DO}}$ lacks its phonological exponent based on Distributed Morphology. Section 4 brings empirical consequences of morphological licensing condition of ellipsis for PAVPE, SJVPE, and *v*P ellipsis in English. Section 5 shows that PF deletion theory of ellipsis is superior to no insertion hypothesis of ellipsis.

There are some remaining issues. One of them is why (8) holds. Its detailed discussion is beyond my scope. However, note that lexical integrity might provide an important insight to explore the nature of (8). Lexical integrity states that word-internal ellipsis is banned. All licensed case discussed in this paper satisfies the principle (and all unlicensed ones do not) if lexical integrity is formalized as word-internal element must not be deprived of phonological features. Then, Root with inherent null phonological exponent such as $\sqrt{\text{DO}}$ can undergo ellipsis because there are no phonological features of the Root that ellipsis eliminates in PF. The other is that how computation in PF proceeds. I tacitly assume here bottom-up computation following Bobaljik (2012). If top-down computation is available, then (8) is always satisfied because ellipsis can precede Vocabulary Insertion of the ellipsis part (phonological computation regarding *v*, the licensing head for VP ellipsis, is followed by Vocabulary Insertion of VP, which always respects (8)). I leave this important issue for future studies.

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