

A Constraint on Argument Ellipsis in Child Japanese

Koji Sugisaki

1. Introduction

It has been claimed in the theoretical literature that one of the distinguished characteristics of East Asian languages is the availability of *argument ellipsis* (e.g. Kim 1999, Oku 1998, Saito 2007, Takahashi 2008): In languages like Japanese and Korean, null objects permit not only a strict-identity interpretation but also a sloppy-identity interpretation, and the latter reading is argued to derive from ellipsis of argument DPs.

(1) Japanese:

- a. John-ga zibun-no konpyuutaa-o kowasita.
John-Nom self-Gen computer-Acc destroyed
'John₁ destroyed his₁ computer.'
- b. Mary-mo _____ kowasita.
Mary-also destroyed
'Mary₂ also destroyed his₁ computer / her₂ computer.'

Not every type of argument can be elided, however. For example, the Japanese sentence in (2b) can only be interpreted as a yes/no question, and does not permit an interpretation as a *wh*-question. The absence of the latter reading suggests that *wh*-phrases cannot undergo argument ellipsis.

- (2) a. Speaker A: John-wa nani-o tabeta no?
John-Top what-Acc ate Q
'What did John eat?'

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Speaker B: Ringo.
apple 'An apple.'

- b. Speaker A: Dewa, Mary-wa _____ tabeta no?
then Mary-Top ate Q
'Then, did Mary eat something/that?'
* 'Then, what did Mary eat?'

This study attempts to demonstrate experimentally that Japanese-speaking preschool children already have the knowledge of the constraint that argument ellipsis cannot be applied to *wh*-phrases. The results are consistent with the view that the relevant constraint directly follows from the properties of biologically-determined Universal Grammar (UG).

2. Argument Ellipsis in Japanese

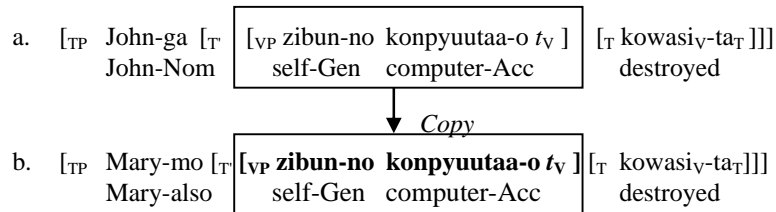
The availability of sloppy reading in examples like (1) is unexpected if the object position is occupied by a null pronoun *pro*, since pronouns do not permit sloppy-identity interpretation, as exemplified in (3b).

- (3) a. John-ga zibun-no konpyuutaa-o kowasita.
John-Nom self-Gen computer-Acc destroyed
'John₁ destroyed his₁ computer.'
- b. Mary-mo sore-o kowasita.
Mary-also it-Acc destroyed
'Mary₂ also destroyed his₁ computer / *her₂ computer.'

In order to account for the availability of sloppy interpretation for null objects in Japanese, Otani and Whitman (1991) put forth the analysis in which the relevant interpretation of (1b) stems from VP-ellipsis. One of the fundamental assumptions of their analysis is that Japanese has overt V-to-T raising, as illustrated in (4a). In the LF component, the antecedent VP is copied onto the empty VP, yielding (5), which contains an anaphor in its object position as well. The LF representation in (5) accounts for the sloppy interpretation of (1b).

- (4) *In Overt Syntax:*
- a. [_{TP} John-ga [_T [_{VP} zibun-no konpyuutaa-o t_V] [_T kowasi_V-ta_T]]]
John-Nom self-Gen computer-Acc destroyed
- b. [_{TP} Mary-mo [_T [_{VP} e] [_T kowasi_V-ta_T]]]
Mary-also destroyed
-

(5) *In the LF Component:*



Even though the VP-ellipsis analysis successfully explains why null objects in Japanese permit sloppy interpretations, it faces a variety of problems (see Hoji 1998, Oku 1998, Saito 2007, and Takahashi 2008). Most notable is the observation by Oku (1998) that even null subjects allow the sloppy-identity reading, as illustrated in (6): The sentence in (6b) can mean either that Mary also thinks that John's proposal will be accepted (the strict reading), or that Mary also thinks that Mary's proposal will be accepted (the sloppy reading). Given that subjects arguably stay outside of VP in overt syntax and in LF, the VP-ellipsis analysis by Otani and Whitman (1991) would predict that the former interpretation should not be possible with null subjects, contrary to facts.

- (6) a. John-wa [zibun-no teian-ga saiyou sareru to]
 John-Top self-Gen proposal-Nom accepted-be that
 omotteiru.
 think
 'John₁ thinks that his₁ proposal will be accepted.'
- b. Mary-mo [_____ saiyou sareru to] omotteiru.
 Mary-also _____ accepted-be that think
 'Mary₂ also thinks that his₁ proposal / her₂ proposal will be adopted.'

In order to accommodate both the null-object examples as in (1) and the null-subject examples as in (6), Oku (1998), Saito (2007) and Takahashi (2008) (among others) put forth an alternative analysis in which only the relevant argument DP (not the VP) is elided.¹ Under their argument-ellipsis analysis, the sentences in (6) have the representations in (7) in overt syntax. After the derivation enters into LF, the antecedent DP, namely the anaphoric subject in (7a), is copied onto the empty subject position in (7b), resulting in the LF representation in (8b), which successfully yields the sloppy interpretation of the null subject.

1. Kim (1999) provides compelling evidence that argument ellipsis is available also in Korean.

(7) *In Overt Syntax:*

- a. ... [CP [DP zibun-no teian-ga] [T_r saiyousareru] to] ...
self-Gen proposal-Nom accepted-be that
- b. ... [CP [DP e] [T_r saiyousareru] to] ...
accepted-be that

(8) *In the LF Component:*

- a. ... [CP [DP zibun-no teian-ga] [T_r saiyousareru] to] ...
self-Gen proposal-Nom accepted-be that
- ↓ Copy
- b. ... [CP [DP zibun-no teian-ga] [T_r saiyousareru] to] ...
self-Gen proposal-Nom accepted-be that

3. Parametric Variation in Argument Ellipsis and the Anti-agreement Approach

Oku (1998) observes that the availability of argument ellipsis is subject to cross-linguistic variation: Argument ellipsis is permitted in Japanese but is not allowed in languages like Spanish or English. As illustrated in (9b), Spanish permits null subjects, but these null subjects cannot have sloppy interpretation: (9b) only means that Juan believes that Maria's proposal will be accepted, and it never means that Juan believes that Juan's proposal will be accepted. In the English example (10), which contains a verb that optionally allow a missing object, the second clause simply means that John did some eating activity, and never permits sloppy reading.

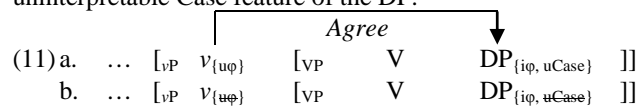
(9) Spanish (Oku 1998: 305):

- a. Maria cree [que su propuesta será aceptada] y
Maria believes that her proposal will-be accepted and
'Maria₁ believes that her₁ proposal will be accepted and ...'
- b. Juan también cree [que _____ será aceptada].
Juan too believes that will-be accepted
'Juan₂ also believes that her₁ proposal will be accepted.'
* 'Juan₂ also believes that his₂ proposal will be accepted.'

(10) English (Oku 1998: 311): Bill₁ ate his₁ shoe, and John ate, too.

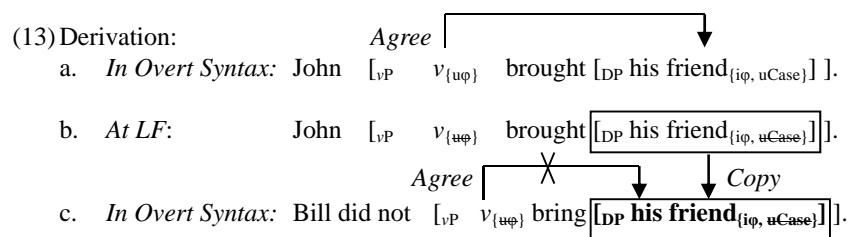
To account for the cross-linguistic difference between Japanese on one hand and English and Spanish on the other, Saito (2007) built on Kuroda's (1998) proposal that the main source of the various differences between English and

Japanese is the presence vs. absence of obligatory agreement, and proposed that argument ellipsis in Japanese stems from the absence of overt agreement in this language. According to Chomsky (2000), agreement is a probe-goal relation induced by a set of uninterpretable ϕ -features on the functional heads of T and v . In the case of object agreement illustrated in (11), the uninterpretable ϕ -features of v agree with the matching, interpretable ϕ -set of the object DP. The object satisfies the condition that the goal must have an uninterpretable Case feature (the Activation Condition), and hence qualifies as a goal. The agreement relation results in the deletion of the uninterpretable ϕ -features on v and the uninterpretable Case feature of the DP.



Saito (2007) argues that the agreement relation illustrated above is obligatory in languages like English and Spanish, and that this obligatory nature of agreement excludes argument ellipsis from these languages. For example, the derivation of the English examples in (12) proceeds as shown in (13). The object DP *his friend* in (12a) must be copied into the object position of (12b) for the latter sentence to be properly interpreted. If we assume that only LF objects can be employed in LF-copying, the DP *his friend* must be copied into (12b) from the LF representation of (12a).² However, this DP has already agreed with its v in (12a), and hence the uninterpretable Case feature that rendered this DP active has already been deleted, as shown in (13b). Then, given the Activation Condition, it does not qualify as a goal in the required agree relation as shown in (13c), and consequently, the derivation crashes due to the remaining uninterpretable ϕ -features of v .

- (12) a. John brought [DP his friend].
 b. * But Bill did not bring _____.

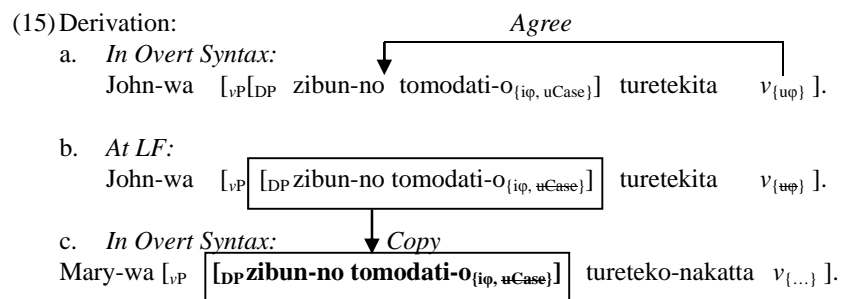


The corresponding derivation converges in Japanese, however, given that Japanese lacks overt agreement, which, according to Saito (2007), indicates that

2. See Saito (2007) for evidence that only LF objects can be employed in the LF-copying operation involved in argument ellipsis.

the uninterpretable ϕ -features on T and v are optional in this language. The derivation of the Japanese examples in (14) proceeds as shown in (15). In (14), the object DP *zibun-no tomodati* ‘self’s friend’ is copied from the LF representation of (14a) into the object position of (14b), as in (15c). Since ϕ -features on a functional head are optional, the v in (14b) need not have uninterpretable ϕ -features. Thus, the object DP in (14a) can be successfully copied into (14b) even though its uninterpretable Case feature has already been deleted, and the derivation converges.

- (14) a. John-wa [DP zibun-no tomodati-o] turetekita.
 John-Top self-Gen friend-Acc brought
 ‘John₁ brought his₁ friend.’
- b. Demo Mary-wa _____ tureteko-nakatta.
 but Mary-Top brought-not
 ‘But Mary₂ did not bring her₂ friend.’



To summarize this section, Saito’s (2007) “anti-agreement” approach attributes the cross-linguistic variation in the availability of argument ellipsis to a more prominent property that is also subject to variation, namely the presence vs. absence of obligatory agreement.³

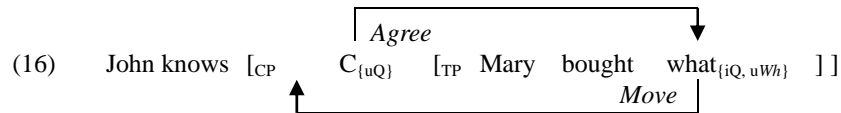
4. A Consequence of the Anti-agreement Approach to Argument Ellipsis

An immediate consequence of the anti-agreement approach proposed by Saito (2007) would be that if a certain type of phrases must undergo obligatory agreement, then that type of phrases cannot be elliptic even in Japanese. I argue that this expectation is indeed borne out by *wh*-phrases.

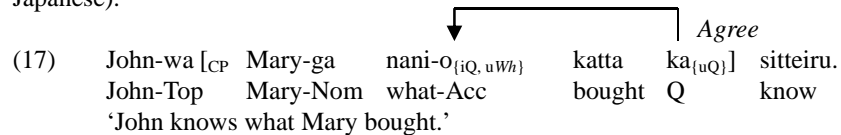
Chomsky (2000) analyzes *wh*-movement in English as follows. A *wh*-phrase has an uninterpretable feature {uWh} and an interpretable feature {iQ}. The

3. See Oku (1998) and Takahashi (2008) for a different approach, which relates the availability of argument ellipsis in Japanese to the existence of scrambling.

former activates the *wh*-phrase for agreement and movement, and the latter matches and agrees with the uninterpretable feature {uQ} of an interrogative complementizer.



Developing the proposals by Watanabe (1992) and Hagstrom (1998), Chomsky suggests the possibility that *wh*-in-situ constructions also involve an agreement relation as illustrated in (17): The difference between *wh*-movement and *wh*-in-situ languages lies in whether the entire *wh*-phrase is moved (as in English), or only the head undergoes movement overtly or covertly (as in Japanese).

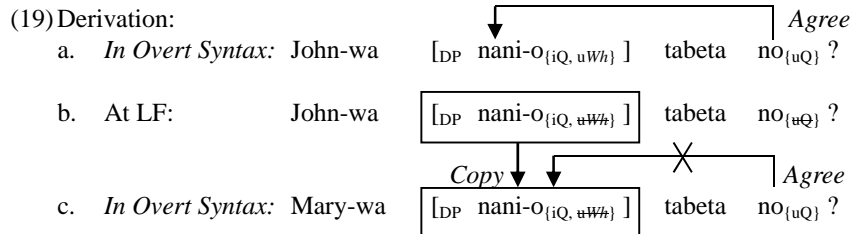


The obligatory agreement relation between a *wh*-phrase and an interrogative complementizer provides a very simple account for the observation that argument ellipsis of *wh*-phrases is not permitted, as illustrated in (2) (which is repeated here as (18)).

- (18) a. Speaker A: John-wa nani-o tabeta no?
 John-Top what-Acc ate Q
 ‘What did John eat?’
 Speaker B: Ringo.
 apple ‘An apple.’
- b. Speaker A: Dewa, Mary-wa _____ tabeta no?
 then Mary-Top ate Q
 ‘Then, did Mary eat something/that?’
 * ‘Then, what did Mary eat?’

The relevant derivation proceeds as shown in (19). The object *wh*-phrase *nani-o* ‘what’ is copied from the LF representation of (18a) into the object position of (18b), as in (19c). However, this *wh*-phrase has already agreed with the complementizer in (18a), and hence the uninterpretable feature {uWh} that rendered this *wh*-phrase active has already been deleted. Then, given the Activation Condition, the copied *wh*-phrase does not qualify as a goal in the required agreement relation, and consequently, the derivation involving LF-copying of a *wh*-phrase does not converge due to the remaining

uninterpretable feature {uQ} of the complementizer.



What the above discussion shows is that the absence of *wh*-phrase ellipsis follows from Saito’s (2007) anti-agreement approach *without any additional cost*, if we adopt Chomsky’s (2000) assumption that *wh*-phrases must undergo agreement with an interrogative complementizer even in *wh*-in-situ languages like Japanese. I must hasten to add the following: I do *not* claim that the derivation in (19) would be the *only* source for the lack of *wh*-phrase ellipsis. Another possible (and plausible) account for this observation is easily available: A *wh*-phrase is inherently focused, and a focused material cannot be subject to ellipsis. What I argue here is that the anti-agreement approach provides an additional way to exclude ellipsis of *wh*-phrases in Japanese, and that the relevant mechanisms automatically follow from (independently motivated) properties of UG. A virtue of deriving the ban on eliding *wh*-phrases from the anti-agreement approach is that we can obtain a clear prediction for children’s knowledge about this constraint: Since the obligatory agreement relation between a *wh*-phrase and an interrogative complementizer directly follows from UG, it is predicted that those Japanese-speaking preschool children who already have the knowledge about argument ellipsis should also have the knowledge that *wh*-phrases cannot undergo this type of ellipsis. In order to evaluate this prediction, the next section summarizes my own previous study that investigated whether argument ellipsis is in the grammar of Japanese-speaking children, and Section 6 reports results of a new experiment which examined children’s knowledge about the ban on eliding *wh*-phrases.

5. Argument Ellipsis in Child Japanese: A Previous Study

Let us recall that Saito’s (2007) anti-agreement approach attributes the availability of argument ellipsis in Japanese to a more prominent property of this language, namely the absence of overt agreement. Previous acquisition literature reports that agreement is acquired fairly early, at least by the age of three. A detailed study by Hyams (2002) summarizes the results of various acquisition studies, and observes that children acquiring “rich” agreement languages such as Italian and Catalan obey subject-verb agreement requirement from the earliest stage (before or around the age of two), even before they produce all the forms

in a paradigm. For example, singular verb morphology is typically acquired before plural morphology, and first- and third-person forms appear earlier than second-person forms. Nevertheless, agreement is almost always correct for those forms that are used: Across children and languages, agreement errors under 4%. Given the finding that agreement errors are extremely rare in the acquisition of “rich” agreement languages, we can reasonably speculate that children acquiring agreementless languages like Japanese would also be sensitive to the absence of overt agreement from the early stages of acquisition.

Since we have reasons to believe that the property that is allegedly connected to argument ellipsis is acquired early, the parametric proposal by Saito (2007) should make the following prediction:

(20) *Prediction for Child Japanese:*

Japanese-speaking preschool children have knowledge of argument ellipsis.

Sugisaki (2007) evaluated this prediction by conducting an experiment with ten Japanese-speaking preschool children, ranging in age from 3(years);01(month) to 5;07 (mean age 4;05).⁴ The experiment examined children’s interpretation of sentences involving null objects, by using a modified version of the Truth-Value Judgment Task.⁵ In this task, each child was told a story, which was accompanied by a series of pictures presented on a laptop computer. At the end of each story, a puppet described verbally what he thought had happened in the story. The task for the child was to judge whether the puppet’s description was true or false, by feeding him either a nice strawberry or a horrible green pepper. The experiment contained (i) two sentences with null objects, and (ii) two sentences with overt pronouns, in order to determine whether children allow the sloppy interpretation for null objects while disallowing this interpretation for overt pronouns. A sample story and the test sentences that followed it are presented in (21) and (22).

(21) A Sample Story:

Today, Panda and Pig enjoyed riding on their favorite tricycles. Now they decided to wash them. Panda said, “Oh! My tricycle is very dirty.” Pig said, “Shall I help you wash your tricycle?” Panda replied, “No, thanks. I will try to do it by myself, so you can work on your own.” They started washing their favorite tricycles.

4. See also Otaki and Yusa (in press) for evaluation of the prediction in (20).

5. See also Matsuo (2007) for a related study which investigated Japanese-speaking children’s interpretation of null-object sentences.

(22) Sample Test Sentences:

- a. Pandasan-ga zibun-no sanrinsya-o aratteru yo.
 Panda-Nom self-Gen tricycle-Acc washing Excl
 ‘Panda₁ is washing his₁ tricycle.’
- b. Butasan-mo _____ / sore-o aratteru yo.
 Pig-also _____ it-Acc washing Excl
 ‘Pig is also washing _____ / it.’

The results are summarized in Table 1. The obtained results clearly indicate that Japanese-speaking preschool children permit the sloppy-identity interpretation for null-object sentences, which in turn suggests that the knowledge of argument ellipsis is already in their grammar. This finding is consistent with the parametric proposal by Saito (2007) that UG is equipped with a parameter that relates the availability of argument ellipsis in Japanese with a more prominent characteristic of this language, namely the absence of agreement.

Sloppy-identity Interpretation of Null Objects	90% acceptance (18/20)
Sloppy-identity Interpretation of Overt Pronouns	85% rejection (17/20)

Table 1: Summary of Sugisaki’s (2007) Results

6. A New Experiment

In the previous section, we have established that the knowledge of argument ellipsis is already in the grammar of Japanese-speaking preschool children. We have also seen in Section 4 that if we adopt the anti-agreement approach to argument ellipsis, the ban on eliding *wh*-phrases should follow from the properties of UG that underlie the obligatory agreement relation between an interrogative complementizer and a *wh*-phrase. These considerations lead to the prediction for acquisition given in (23).

(23) Prediction for Child Japanese:

Japanese-speaking preschool children have the knowledge about the constraint that *wh*-phrases cannot undergo argument ellipsis.

In order to evaluate the prediction in (23), an experiment was conducted with 16 Japanese-speaking preschool children, ranging in age from 3;09 to 4;07 (mean age: 4;01). The task for children was Question-after-Story. In this task, each child was told a short story, which was accompanied by a series of pictures presented on a laptop computer. At the end of each story, a puppet appeared on the screen and asked the child two questions with respect to what had happened

in the story. The task for the child was to answer these questions. All the test questions were pre-recorded and came out from the laptop computer.

A sample story is presented in (24).

(24) A Sample Story:

Duck and Squirrel are playing with their favorite toys. Duck now starts to draw his favorite airplane. Since Squirrel is not good at drawing, he thinks of just taking a look at how well Duck draws the airplane. However, by looking at Duck's drawing, Squirrel now wants to give a try. So Squirrel also starts to draw his favorite train.



Each story was followed by two questions. The first question was always a *wh*-question like (25). The second question, which was posed after a child had answered the first one, was of three types: (i) a *wh*-question as in (26a), (ii) a question involving a null object as in (26b), and (iii) a truncated question as in (26c). In adult Japanese, the questions in (26a) and (26c) are interpreted as a *wh*-question (and hence requires a short answer “A train”), while the question with a null object in (26b) is interpreted as a yes/no question.⁶

(25) The 1st Question: Ahirusan-wa nani-o kaita kana?
 Duck-Top what-Acc draw Q
 ‘What did Duck draw?’

(26) The 2nd Question:

a. *Wh*-question:

Jaa, Risusan-wa nani-o kaita kana?
 then Squirrel-Top what-Acc draw Q
 ‘Then, what did Squirrel draw?’

b. Question with a null object:

Jaa, Risusan-wa _____ kaita kana?
 then Squirrel-Top draw Q
 ‘Then, did Squirrel draw (something)?’

6. The truncated question in (26c) is interpreted as a *wh*-question since the preceding question (25) is also a *wh*-question: It can be interpreted as a yes/no question when the preceding question is a yes/no question.

- c. Truncated question:
 Jaa, Risusan-wa?
 then Squirrel-Top ‘Then, Squirrel!’

One might worry that some intonational difference between a null-object question like (26b) and a *wh*-question as in (26a) may play a role for children to conclude that the former is not a *wh*-question but a yes/no question. In order to make sure that there should be no crucial intonational difference between these two types of questions (other than the presence of a *wh*-phrase), the null-object questions were created from the corresponding *wh*-questions by deleting the sound corresponding the *wh*-phrase, using Praat (Boersma and Weenink 2010).

Truncated questions like (26c) were added to exclude the possibility that children always provide a yes/no answer to questions without an overt *wh*-phrase: If it can be shown that children interpret questions with a null object like (26b) as a yes/no question despite the fact that they interpret truncated questions like (26c) as a *wh*-question, then this would allow us to conclude that children do not determine the interpretation of a question based on the presence or the absence of a *wh*-phrase.

The experiment consisted of two trials with a *wh*-question as in (26a), two trials with a null-object question as in (26b), and two trials with a truncated question as in (26c). The order of presentation was pseudo-randomized.

The results are summarized in Table 2.

	Interpreted as a <i>Wh</i> -question	Interpreted as a <i>Y/N</i> question
<i>Wh</i> -questions as in (26a)	100% (32/32)	0% (0/32)
Questions with a null object as in (26b)	6.25% (2/32)	93.75% (30/32)
Truncated questions as in (26c)	96.88% (31/32)	0% (0/32)

Table 2: Summary of Children’s Responses

Except for the responses from a single child (4;04), all the answers to null-object questions were yes/no answers (more specifically, *yes* answers). In contrast, virtually all the answers to truncated questions were short answers such as “A train”, which suggests that children interpreted these sentences as *wh*-questions. This finding suggests that Japanese-speaking children do not have a strategy of interpreting questions without a *wh*-phrase as yes/no questions. The sharp contrast between responses to questions involving a null object and responses to truncated questions suggests that children do not interpret null-object questions as object *wh*-questions. Thus, the obtained results clearly indicate that Japanese-speaking preschool children already have the knowledge that *wh*-phrases are not allowed to undergo argument ellipsis.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrated experimentally that Japanese-speaking preschool children already have the knowledge that argument ellipsis does not apply to *wh*-phrases. The results of this study, combined with the results of my own previous study (Sugisaki 2007), suggest that not only the knowledge of argument ellipsis but also the knowledge of its constraints are in children's grammar from the earliest observable stages. These findings are consistent with the view that the availability of argument ellipsis and its constraints directly follow from principles and parameters of UG.

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