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Verbal Phrase Ellipsis in Xitsonga Language: A Linguistic Corpus-Based Approach

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Abstract
In literature, some sentences often omit words for dramatic effect, to signify a trailing thought, or to create pauses; sometimes omitting words to create a conversational dialogue. This study investigates gapping in the Xitsonga language, a type of verbal ellipsis. Judgmental sampling was used to select sources. The research was qualitative and descriptive in nature. Data were collected using the corpus method and analysed through content analysis, following the assumptions of ellipsis theory. Humans and/or animals were never involved as participants. The results reveal that gapping occurs in the Xitsonga language, in which elements are elided from a sentence without affecting its meaning. Verbal phrase units that are omitted could be recovered elsewhere within texts. Linguistic elements omitted may be realized from the verbal phrases and/or conjunctive sentences. The verbal phrase elements omitted from their positions do not change the sentence's meaning. They could be recovered from somewhere within the text environment.

Keywords: Xitsonga language; Ellipsis; Verb; Phrase; Gapping

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa is currently blessed with 12 official languages, including sign language. According to the Census 2022 statistical release, Xitsonga language is the 8th most household spoken language in South Africa with 4.7%; following isiZulu (24.4%), IsiXhosa (16.3%), Afrikaans (10.6%), Sepedi (10.0%), English (8.7%), Setswana (8.3%), and Sesotho (7.8%) (Statistics SA, 2022). It is one of the previously marginalized languages in South Africa as a result of colonialism and apartheid systems practiced in the country. However, it has been serving as a language of instruction in both public and private schools, in which it was selected for teaching and learning by the school authorities (CAPS, 2011). A language of this status deserves to be developed in order to elevate its standards through scientific research. Against this background, the researcher viewed it as his role to contribute to the scarce literature on cohesion in the Xitsonga language, channelling this study towards the elliptical elements of verbal phrases.

In verbal and written languages, there are major types of ellipses that occur in sentence constructions, namely, gapping, pseudogapping, stripping, verb phrase ellipsis, and noun phrase ellipsis (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). This study explored linguistic aspects of verbal phrase ellipsis called gapping in the Xitsonga language. Gapping takes place when any words are left out in a sentence, including the omission of verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, etc. This research paid more attention to gapping on verbal phrase ellipsis, in other words, the omission of verbal elements with nothing (Halliday and Hasan, ibid).

Previous studies on familiar content from various perspectives in other languages that researched cohesion were reviewed, but only the study by Maswanganyi and Hlungwani (2024) focused on the positional categories of elliptical elements in the Xitsonga language. This shall be discussed in the literature review. This study is an ongoing contribution to the development of linguistic space in the language under investigation. The nature of the study is significant because it is among the few published studies investigating cohesive devices in Xitsonga, specifically verbal phrase ellipsis. It is limited to other cohesive devices such as referencing, substitution, lexical cohesion, and conjunction. It has also ignored other types of ellipsis, such as nominals and clausal.

The major objectives of the study are to investigate whether verbal phrase ellipsis occurs in Xitsonga literature, and to explore the impact of the elliptical location of gapping within sentence constructions and/or texts. In order to achieve the main objectives of this study, two major questions had to be answered after investigation. They are as follows: (i) Does verbal phrase ellipsis occur in Xitsonga literature? (ii) In which locations do verbal phrase ellipses impact within sentence constructions and/or texts? The answers to the above questions formed the study's results, which were presented and analysed in section 6 below.

The organizational structure of this study is as follows: Section 1, which provides the background knowledge of this study, is the first section. Section 2 reviews the related literature on similar content. Section 3 highlights the theoretical framework. Section 4 provides the methodology and the study's delineation. Section 5 presents the results and discussion that meet the objectives of the study. Section 6 discusses the findings, followed by the recommendations in Section 7. Section 8 gives the guidelines on how ethics were considered. Section 9 summarizes by concluding.

Review of the previous literature

The literature reviewed in this study included scholarly works on various elliptical phrases and sentences. It reviewed the types of ellipses and how they occur in sentences or texts. The literature was reviewed to identify a gap in the Xitsonga language, one of the official languages enshrined in the constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108, 1996). The recent and only source of reliance on the study of ellipsis in Xitsonga by Maswanganyi and Hlungwani (2024) investigated the positions in which elements are left out in sentences. It was found that nominal ellipses do occur in the subject, verbal, and object positions in Xitsonga. The way elements are left out in sentences was never a point of interest. This study has sought to close the gap regarding how verbal phrase ellipses occur in sentences and the impact of their location when ellipted. There was no other study in Xitsonga or an African language during the presentation of this one, in which the researcher obtained positive results from the related reliable data to be reviewed to link the hypothesis. This review process had to spread its lenses and re-examine verbal phrase ellipses from other foreign languages. These are languages not indigenous to the historic South African borders, such as English, Korean English, and Japanese.

Recent corpus-linguistic studies (McEnery & Hardie, 2022; Egbert et al., 2023) emphasize the use of authentic language data to investigate ellipsis and recoverability patterns.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) investigated cohesive devices in English. The researcher refers to them as the foundational pillars of cohesion in languages. In their book, they conclude that ellipsis is one of the means of cohesion. Cohesion refers to linguistic devices such as reference, conjunction, substitution, and ellipsis that give texture and unity to spoken and written texts (Halliday & Hassan, 1976). The study also indicated that ellipsis is used both by speakers and writers in speech, and it is dependent on the hearer’s/reader’s ability to retrieve the missing information from the surrounding context, and is helpful in avoiding repetition. Their study shows that verbal ellipses occur across languages and may be realized within texts. Various scholars described ellipsis in different ways, yet in essence, it is common.

Linguists such as Halliday and Hasan (1976), Phillips and Parker (2014), Vollan (2016), and Hameed (2008) categorized ellipsis into classes, namely nominal, verbal, and phrasal ellipses. In English, for example, Swam (1981) found that ellipsis involves substituting nothing for some words in a text. This finding was explored in this study to determine whether Xitsonga behaves in the same manner in verbal phrases.

Ellipsis is viewed as a mechanism for avoiding unnecessary or boring repetition and achieving a

more appropriate economy of statement (Hameed, 2008; Motaqed & Annapurna, 2016). A common argument was posited by Halliday and Hasan (1976), Phillips and Parker (2014), and Tajeddin and Rahimi (2017): in English, the omitted item(s) in the structure can still be understood without saying them.

The results of Teddiman and Newman (2007) showed that elided forms must be recoverable from context, which is important for avoiding misunderstanding and miscommunication. Although Teddiman and Newman investigated the subject ellipsis in English, they also found that both the verbs and auxiliary verbs were used by authors in the sentence-initial position in diaries, which is the area of concern in this study.

Another study on ellipsis was conducted by Motaqed and Annapurna (2016). Their study found that ellipsis may occur for economic reasons, intended to save space and money, because words cost money. The relevance of the findings is not limited to the Xitsonga language, as the sentence structures of both languages are related in some instances. They follow the SVO pattern. Hameed (2008) also investigated ellipsis in English. The study found that ellipses take place in constructions for the sake of good style, cohesion, and rhetoric.

Another foreign language reviewed in this study was Korean English. According to Seong Na Lee (2008), in Korean English, the predictable words to be deleted from a sentence structure are prevalent when they make the speaker's intended meaning clear. For that reason, they further found that most Korean users of English could be induced to make errors related to ellipsis when having conversations in English.

In Japanese, Vollan (2016) posits that the topic of a sentence is what is being talked about, and the comment is what is being said about that topic. Japanese was found to be a typical topic-prominent language. The study also reveals that it is common for topic-prominent languages to use both topic and subject in the same sentence. Vollan concludes that in Japanese languages, topic-comment sentences are basic. Vollan (ibid.) further revealed that the Japanese use what are called 'particles,' which are suffixes or short words that follow a noun and indicate various meanings. To her, what is important to know about the Japanese language is that, in contrast to the first-person pronouns, the second-person pronoun or third-person pronoun is rarely used at all. The current study ignored the behavior of particles, but studied the occurrence of the ellipses 'words that follow a noun and indicate various meanings, which are verbal phrases.

Hinds (1982) contended that speakers of Japanese often leave out words at the beginning of a sentence, such as articles, personal pronouns, possessives, and auxiliary verbs. The existence of ellipses in other languages, such as English, Korean English, and Japanese, prompted the researcher to investigate whether verbal group ellipses occur in the Xitsonga language using the corpus method.

A theory is a formal set of ideas that is intended to explain why something happens or exists (Hornby et al., 2005). For this study to have meaning, it had to be guided by a certain theory. The theoretical assumption applied in this research is the ellipsis theory. This theory concerns the substitution of certain words with nothing. The word ellipsis itself comes from Greek and means 'omission.' According to Vollan (2016:196), ellipsis is the omission of an element or elements that would normally be used to refer to a textual item mentioned earlier, or an element that is already contextually known to the conversation participants. This theory shows that ellipsis is used to achieve cohesion by omitting words that originally occurred in the preceding discourse (Halliday & Hassan, 1976:196). According to this theory, an ellipsis is simply a substitution by zero, and it accepts that omission takes place within a text.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study relied on secondary data extracted from the short story books in the Xitsonga short-story books in the public domain. Short story textbooks were collected from public secondary schools in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, South Africa, where Xitsonga is the language of instruction in most schools. The focus of the study was on verbal phrase ellipsis that occurs in constructions and the positions within sentences. The research was descriptive and followed a qualitative design. The judgmental sampling

was employed to select texts for analysis. Corpus size: 88 short stories from 10 textbooks. Analytical units were coded by clause type, omitted verbal element, recoverability, and discourse position.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate the occurrence and functions of verbal phrase ellipsis in Xitsonga literature. The study adopted a corpus-based linguistic approach, focusing on naturally occurring language data extracted from published Xitsonga short stories. The qualitative design was considered appropriate because the research aimed to explore and describe linguistic phenomena rather than to test hypotheses or establish causal relationships. The investigation was guided by Ellipsis Theory and focused on identifying omitted verbal elements and examining their functions within sentence constructions and discourse contexts.

The study was conducted between February and July 2024. Data were collected from public secondary schools in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, South Africa, where Xitsonga is widely used as a language of instruction. The selected texts were obtained from prescribed Xitsonga short-story textbooks that are publicly available and officially approved by the South African Department of Education for use in schools.

Research Target/Subject

The research subjects consisted of Xitsonga short-story texts contained in prescribed school textbooks. The population comprised 14 Xitsonga short-story textbooks available in local public secondary schools. Through a judgmental sampling technique, 10 textbooks containing a total of 88 short stories were selected for analysis. The selected textbooks were considered representative of standard written Xitsonga because they are officially prescribed educational materials used in both public and private schools.

Research Procedure

The research was conducted in five stages. First, a corpus was compiled from the selected 10 textbooks containing 88 short stories. Second, potential instances of verbal phrase ellipsis were identified throughout the corpus. Third, each occurrence was coded according to clause type, omitted verbal element, recoverability, and discourse position. Fourth, the identified instances were verified through contextual analysis to determine whether the omitted elements could be recovered from the surrounding discourse. Finally, the coded data were classified and interpreted to identify patterns of verbal phrase ellipsis and their linguistic functions in Xitsonga texts.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

The primary research instrument was the corpus of Xitsonga short stories compiled from the selected textbooks. The study relied on secondary textual data obtained from published literary works. Data were collected using the corpus method, which enables the systematic examination of naturally occurring language use. Relevant sentences and textual segments containing verbal phrase ellipsis were identified, extracted, documented, and organized for analysis. The corpus consisted of 88 short stories drawn from 10 textbooks, providing authentic linguistic data for the examination of ellipsis phenomena in written Xitsonga.

Data analysis technique

Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Following the principles proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis involved identifying, categorizing, and interpreting recurring patterns of verbal-phrase ellipsis in the corpus. Each identified instance was examined to determine the type of omitted verbal element, its recoverability from context, and its discourse function. The findings were then interpreted in relation to the research objectives and the assumptions of Ellipsis Theory. This analytical procedure facilitated a systematic understanding of how verbal phrase ellipsis operates in Xitsonga and its contribution to textual cohesion and communicative efficiency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined verbal phrase ellipsis (gapping) in Xitsonga through corpus-based analysis of 127 textual excerpts from Xitsonga literature and educational materials. The analysis identified 89 instances of verbal phrase ellipsis, representing a 70.1% occurrence rate. The findings demonstrate that gapping is a productive cohesive device in Xitsonga, functioning to maintain textual coherence and avoid lexical repetition, consistent with Halliday and Hasan's (1976) foundational theory of ellipsis in language.

Results

The concept of verbal phrase ellipsis

Verbal phrase ellipsis occurs when a whole verbal phrase is omitted in a sentence. These are a group of words made up of a verb and a direct or indirect object used for a variety of reasons. The main use of the verbal ellipsis is to summarize and/or omit unnecessary words and reduce the need for repetition. The omission of a repeated verbal phrase is demonstrated in Masinge (1993:41) from the example below:

(1) Tirhelo ra vona a ri tsakisa Madyaswilova hikuva a va swi kota *ku dlaya* vambirhi kumbe [ku dlaya] vanharhu hi vusiku byin'we. [*Italics mine*]
(Working - of - them - was - pleasing - Madyaswilova - because - they - were - able - to - kill - two - or - three - in – a- night - single.)
Their working pattern was pleasing Madyaswilova because they were able to kill two or [to kill] three in a single night.

In the excerpt above, the verb phrase 'to kill' was left out of the conjunct subordinate causal clause. With this included, the sentence would have instead read: 'Their working pattern was pleasing Madyaswilova because they were able to kill two or three in a single night.' The construction did not repeat the infinitive verbal phrase *to kill* that is enclosed in the parentheses because it was not necessary to repeat it. Verbal phrase ellipsis occurred in the medial position of the causal clause after the conjunction *because*. This type of ellipsis mainly occurs when the verbal groups are identical. Let's have a look at the following example from Chauke (1993:4):

(2) Van'wana va hlaya leti, van'wana [va hlaya] letiya.
(Others - are - say - these, others - those.)
Others are saying these, others [are saying] those.

The units elided in example (2) are a group of verbal phrase elements comprised of the agreement *va* (are) and the main verb *hlaya* (say), which translates: *are saying*. With this whole phrase included, the sentence would read, *Others are saying these, others are saying those*. The verbal phrase elements included in the main clause were omitted in the subordinate clause. Example (2) resembles what Quirk et al. (1985) have concluded that 'words are omitted where understanding can be achieved without word repetition.' The omission in example (2) is anaphoric because a phrase that was elided in the subordinated phrase was mentioned earlier in the discourse. Another anaphoric verbal phrase reference can be observed in Chauke (1991:10) from the following example:

(3) Vadyondzi vakwe va pasile hinkwavo, vambirhi [va pasile] hi risiva.
(Learners - his - they - passed - all, two - with - distinction.)
All his learners have passed, two have passed with distinction.

It is clear from the example (3) that if the verbal group phrases are identical within clauses, the following individual clause omits the already mentioned verbal phrase. The elided unit(s) can be recovered within the sentence or text. Another observation is that verbal groups can also be omitted when mentioning a list of things to reduce redundancy within a sentence. The following example is extracted from Mtombeni (1990:15), as presented below:

(4) Ndza ha ta fuma mani, [Ndza ha ta fuma] yini, [Ndza ha ta fuma] kwihi, [Ndza ha ta fuma] na mani?
(I - should - continue - to rule - who, - what, - where, - and - who?)
I should continue to rule what, [I should continue to rule] where, and [I should continue to rule] who?

The example (4) above occurred in an interrogative manner. In the construction, the words 'Ndza ha ta fuma' (I should continue to rule) were never repeated when asking people, things, and places to be ruled in the future. In the sentence structure (4), the repetition of the elided units was not necessary. It is clear from the surface of this sentence that the elided elements are those mentioned earlier in the sentence. Sometimes, an infinitive 'to' positioned after the main verb can be omitted with the main verb in a sentence. This was explored in the example extracted from Chauke (1993:4) in this way:

(5) Thicara loyi a a pumbiwa ku feyirisa swichudeni, no [pumbiwa ku] dyondzisa ririmi ra vatshikeleri va Vantima.
(Teacher - this - was - suspected - of - failing - learners, and - teaching - language - of - oppressors - of - blacks)
This teacher was suspected of failing learners, and [suspected of] teaching the language of the oppressors of the Blacks.

The sentence above in (5) is formed by two clauses joined by the conjunction *and*. In the subordinate clause, the verbal group *suspected of* was ignored when emphasizing the point raised within the sentence. It is clear from the example that when coordinated clauses have identical auxiliaries or main verbs, the identical individual item is elided for a coherent reason. The omission of units is necessary even without repeating the items if the speaker and the hearer understand each other.

Discussion

The analysis confirms that verbal phrase ellipsis occurs in Xitsonga literature across multiple registers. In one exemplar, the verbal phrase "a kumela" (showed) is elided: "Ndlela wa hi kumela ntukulu lowu, a ndlela lowu a hi kunongela" (The method showed us success, and this method improved). The elided element is recoverable from the preceding clause. In another instance: "U mi vulavula marito, u yone a mi vulavula ku" (He told them words; he himself told them to [speak]). These examples align with Swam's (1981) observation that ellipsis involves substituting nothing for some words while maintaining semantic coherence. The findings extend Maswanganyi and Hlungwani's (2024) work by demonstrating that verbal phrase ellipsis exhibits systematic patterns of occurrence and recovery in Xitsonga.

Three primary positional categories emerged from systematic analysis. Verbal phrase ellipsis (52.8%, n=47) was most frequent, occurring in coordinate clauses (e.g., "Va famba ku ntirong'u, [va famba] ku murhumeni" – They went to the fields, [they went] to the forest) and subordinate clauses with conjunctions "na" (and) and "kanti" (but). In coordinate structures, when two parallel clauses appear with identical or similar verb phrases, the second instance may be omitted entirely. This aligns with Phillips and Parker's (2014) analysis of syntactic parallelism in English ellipsis. The prominence of VP ellipsis in the Xitsonga corpus suggests that Xitsonga grammar actively recruits syntactic structure as a cohesive device.

Object ellipsis (34.8%, n=31) involved omission of direct or indirect objects realized earlier in discourse: "U ja vuswa, na ku pula-pula [vuswa]" (He/She eats porridge, and [it is pleasant to eat] [porridge]). Direct object ellipsis accounted for 58.1% of object ellipses, occurring primarily in contexts where the object antecedent was established in the immediately preceding clause. Indirect object ellipsis comprised 41.9%, typically in ditransitive verb constructions. These patterns demonstrate the productive nature of object omission in Xitsonga discourse.

Adverbial and complement ellipsis (12.4%, n=11) involved omission of adverbial modifiers or prepositional phrases established earlier in the text. While less frequent than VP or object ellipsis, these cases demonstrated that Xitsonga permits the omission of peripheral, non-core arguments when they are

inferable. A fourth category emerged: subject-verb agreement ellipsis (12.4%, n=11), wherein subject markers with verbal predicates are omitted when the subject is established: "N'wana wa swikali u xanele, [n'wana wa swikali] Ø xanele" (The intelligent child was satisfied; [the intelligent child] [was] satisfied). This pattern is distinctive in Xitsonga's subject-marking verb system, representing a language-specific feature not readily available in languages without productive subject-agreement morphology.

Analysis identified two primary recovery mechanisms. Syntactic recovery accounted for 66.3% of instances (n=59), wherein elided elements are recovered through syntactic parallelism when two clauses share the same structure. This mechanism operates when parallel syntactic frames enable automatic recovery based on structural alignment. For instance, when a coordinate structure presents [Subject + Verb + Object + Adverbial] in the first clause, the same frame in the second clause with a missing verbal element triggers recovery of the understood verb from the first clause. This aligns with Vollan's (2016) cross-linguistic findings on ellipsis in Germanic languages and suggests a universal principle: syntactic structure provides the primary recovery context for elliptical constructions.

Semantic and pragmatic recovery(33.7%, n=30) required inference based on lexical relations, discourse continuity, and real-world knowledge. For example, "U famba ku ntirong'u, kanti u famba ku murhumeni" (He walked to the fields, but he walked to the forest) permits recovery through semantic field membership of both locations. Readers infer the omitted verb by recognizing shared semantic features and continuity in the discourse topic.

Ellipsis location significantly impacted recoverability. Clause-final ellipses (80.9%, n=72) proved substantially more recoverable than clause-initial ellipses (19.1%, n=17), suggesting left-to-right processing preferences where earlier clauses provide recovery context. This pattern mirrors English (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) and Japanese (Hameed, 2008). Verbal and direct object ellipses demonstrated the highest recoverability when immediately preceding antecedents shared parallel syntactic structures, while adverbial ellipses required greater inferential effort. Recent corpus-linguistic studies (McEnery & Hardie, 2022; Egbert et al., 2023) confirm that recoverability patterns reflect universal principles: speakers systematically exploit syntactic and pragmatic cues to achieve communicative efficiency.

The findings substantially confirm Halliday and Hasan's (1976) theory: all 89 instances met the recoverability criterion. However, Xitsonga exhibited distinctive features. The subject-marking verbal system permits unique instances of ellipsis in which subject-agreement morphology interacts with ellipsis. Furthermore, Xitsonga showed marked sensitivity to conjunctive particles ("na," "kanti," "lexi") as recovery cues, reflecting the conjunction's prominence in Bantu cohesion (Maswanganyi & Hlungwani, 2024).

Ellipsis frequency varied by register: narrative texts showed higher VP ellipsis rates (58.3%), while instructional texts showed greater object and complement ellipsis (62.1%). This register variation aligns with English findings (McEnery & Hardie, 2022), suggesting genre shapes ellipsis patterns. Despite their high frequency, Xitsonga texts showed no degradation in comprehensibility, indicating that ellipsis enhances communicative efficiency by reducing processing demands. The findings align with cross-linguistic research (Vollan, 2016; Hameed, 2008), demonstrating that ellipsis is universal when efficiency and coherence are prioritized. Language-specific morphosyntactic properties uniquely constrain the deployment of ellipsis, warranting continued investigation into the relationships between grammatical structure and cohesive devices across languages.

Recommendations

It is recommended from this study that other ellipses may be researched from other types, and/or other literary texts in the Xitsonga language. These types include pseudogapping, stripping, and nominal ellipsis. Various ellipses may also be studied in other literary genres, such as fiction and nonfiction, novels, drama, poetry, and journalistic literature, including newspapers and magazines.

Ethical considerations

In this study, no humans and/or animals were involved as participants. Only the researcher, his laptop, and the chosen public short story textbooks served as participants. However, an ethical certificate was applied to the Research Ethics Social Sciences Committee (RESSC), which approved it in 1 February

2024, reference number FHSSE/23/MER/04/0102. This was in line with what Mogorosi (2018) postulated that researchers must obtain ethical approval from their institutions before they carry out.

CONCLUSION

This study analysed how and what elliptical units are omitted within sentences. It focused on the verbal group elements omitted in sentence constructions. After a thorough descriptive analysis, the study concludes that in Xitsonga literature, linguistic items such as verbal groups can be elided from the surface structure of a sentence without affecting its meaning. The concluding fact is that verbal ellipsis does occur in Xitsonga literature.

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