# Now you see me, now you don't: MaxElide effects in Russian

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BACKGROUND: Gribanova (2017) develops a clausal-ellipsis account of Russian verb-stranding constructions involving verb fronting under polarity focus. The empirical foundation of that account is the claim that A's question in (1) only allows a null-subject response in the context of verb fronting.

(1)  A.  Vȳ  otpravili pis'mo  v  Moskvu  i    posȳlku  v  Piter?
         you sent      letter  to Moscow  and package  to St. Petersburg

         'Did you send a letter to Moscow and a package to St. Petersburg?'

     B.  Otpravili [TP …] /*Otpravili [TP mȳ [VP … ]]
         sent               sent         we

         'Yes, we did.'

Gribanova (2017) derives the distribution of the judgements in (1) from the interaction of syntactic head movement, verb-stranding VP/TP ellipsis and a general inviolable constraint on movement-derived ellipsis types, *MaxElide* (Merchant 2008: 141). She follows Hartman 2011 in claiming that verb movement can create parallelism domains for ellipsis just like phrasal movement. Setting A-movement aside for the moment, this theory has two variables with two levels each: ellipsis size (TP *vs*. VP) and movement type (phrasal movement and head movement), which makes it especially amenable to experimental testing.

AIMS AND HYPOTHESES TO BE TESTED: We pursue two aims. Firstly, we aim to establish whether *MaxElide* is operative in Russian to begin with. Secondly, we aim to establish whether the (statistically significant, Kasenov & Rudnev 2025) drop in acceptability between the two responses in (1B) in the context of polarity focus is an instance of *MaxElide*. The Hartman-Gribanova approach predicts that the smaller domain should have an identical negative effect irrespective of the type of movement. This requires that the interaction effect of the two variables not be statistically significant.

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN: Our online acceptability judgement study uses a 2 × 2 experimental design. The first independent variable is the type of movement, VRBM/PHRM ('verb movement/phrasal movement'). The second independent variable is the size of the elided constituent (TP/VP 'TP-ellipsis/VP-ellipsis'). The four conditions are constructed in such a way as to ensure lexical matching between them. All stimuli as well as all fillers appear as dialogues, which is why the sluicing examples are all examples of *matrix* sluicing (Landau 2020) rather than embedded sluicing. An example paradigm of all four conditions is provided below.

(2)  Anton budet znakomit' kogo-to  s    Peteǐ i   Koleǐ. – Kogo?          [PHRM;TP]
     Anton will  acquaint   someone  with Petya and Kolya    whom

     'Anton will introduce someone to Petya and Kolya. – Who?'

(3)  Anton budet znakomit' kogo-to  s    Peteǐ i   Koleǐ. – Kogo on budet?   [PHRM;VP]
     Anton will  acquaint   someone  with Petya and Kolya    whom he will

     'Anton will introduce someone to Petya and Kolya. – Who will he?'

(4)  Anton ne  poznakomil Mashu s    Peteǐ i   Dashu s    Koleǐ. – Poznakomil. [VRBM;TP]
     Anton not acquainted  Masha with Peya  and Dasha with Kolya     acquainted

(5) Anton ne poznakomil Mashu s    Peteǐ i  Dashu s    Koleǐ. – Poznakomil on!
    Anton not acquainted Masha with Peya and Dasha with Kolya   acquainted he

    'Anton didn't introduce Masha to Petya or Dasha to Kolya. – He did.'        [VʀʙM;VP]

If Gribanova (2017) is correct, we expect, firstly, that (3) and its counterparts should consistently receive lower scores than (2) and its counterparts, approaching the acceptability levels of the bad fillers. We also expect there to be no statistically significant difference in the magnitude of this drop in acceptability between the PʜʀM and VʀʙM conditions, since one and the same mechanism – MaxElide – is responsible for both.

Exᴘᴇʀɪᴍᴇɴᴛᴀʟ sᴇᴛᴜᴘ: Our four experimental lists each contain 16 stimulus sentences and 20 filler sentences plus an additional pair of training sentences. The fillers are divided in two groups: 16 fillers are items from a different study unrelated to ellipsis, and the remaining four involve a violation of morphological subcategorisation by a preposition. The experiment is implemented via the web-based software PCIbex (Zehr & Schwarz 2018) on the croudsourcing platform Yandex.Tasks. The conditions were presented — as dialogues — one at a time. The participants were asked to score each item's acceptability on a 1–7 Likert scale; they rated each combination of the conditions four times, once per experimental block. All participants declared themselves native speakers of Russian and provided their informed written consent to take part in the study.

Rᴇsᴜʟᴛs: We report results from 181 participants, mean age = 37.08 (SD = 11.15). The results of each participant were transformed to within-subject $z$-scores to eliminate potential scale bias. The subcategorisation-violating fillers have a mean $z$-score of $-.725$; their sole use was to establish a sanity threshold. We exclude the remaining filler sentences from our calculations as they are irrelevant for the purposes of this study. The mean $z$-scores are .9 (SD = .77) for [PʜʀM, TP], $-.44$ (SD = .74) for [PʜʀM, VP], .72 (SD = .79) for [VʀʙM, TP], and .51 (SD = .78) for [VʀʙM, VP]. The interaction plot shows that the [VP] condition negatively affects the acceptability of both the [PʜʀM] and [VʀʙM] conditions.

A linear mixed-effects model with *participant* and *item* as random effects and *ellipsis size*, *movement type* and their interaction as fixed effects supports this conclusion. The intercept condition is [PʜʀM, TP]. All the three predictors are significant. [PʜʀM, VP] is rated lower than [PʜʀM, TP] with $\beta = -1.345$ (SE = .05, $p < .001$). [VrbM] is also significant ($\beta = -.177$, SE = .05, $p = .001$). Crucially, the interaction term is also significant ($\beta = 1.13$, SE = .07, $p < .001$). We interpret this as saying that eliding the VP yields a different effect for verb movement and for phrasal movement than does eliding the TP.
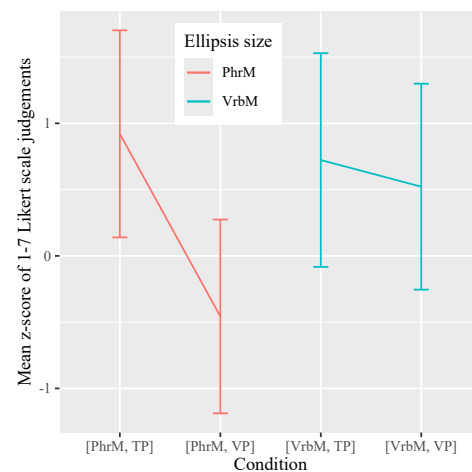


Dɪsᴄᴜssɪᴏɴ ᴀɴᴅ ᴄᴏɴsᴇǫᴜᴇɴᴄᴇs: The results and their analysis show that the approach whereby the difference in acceptability between the null-subject and overt-subject responses in (1B) and their likes is a result of *MaxElide* forcing TP-ellipsis over VP-ellipsis cannot be maintained and must be abandoned. This has an important theoretical consequence: the overt-subject responses are both acceptable (cf. Kasenov & Rudnev 2025) and not derived via VP-ellipsis. If they had been so derived, they would have resulted in a real *MaxElide* violation. Consequently, an alternative explanation is required, couched either in terms of argument ellipsis, null proforms, or a combination of the two. We explore these in more detail in the eventual talk.

Cᴏɴᴄʟᴜsɪᴏɴ: We can conclude that the prototypical *MaxElide* is operative in Russian in broadly the same way as in English. This is the first direct empirical justification of the applicability of this effect to Russian ellipsis in the context of Ā-movement. When several deletable constituents are availabe within a given domain of ellipsis parallelism, however defined, *MaxElide* chooses the largest, forcing sluicing over VP-ellipsis. When

it comes to polarity ellipsis, *MaxElide* does not apply, suggesting a different mechanism than clausal ellipsis is at work.

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