

ELLIPSIS

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Language has many ways of developing or changing or adapting or what you will, of which one is the fairly prevalent use of ellipsis in the sense of some words being omitted from an utterance without that utterance becoming unclear. There obviously is more than one reason for employing an ellipsis; its use is not always due to laziness or a passion for short cuts.

One of the more interesting reasons is to be found in the developing Twentieth Century preference for metonymy as opposed for example to metaphor. By this is meant the substitution of one word for a longer phrase as in the case of 'Pretoria' for 'the government of South Africa' or the substitution of fewer or shorter words for more or longer as for example in 'the turf' for 'horse racing' or the retention of part of a phrase to designate the whole as in 'he hit the ball right down the flag'. The last example may be regarded as an ellipsis or metonymy, depending on the point of view adopted. If metonymy is preferred, 'flag' would be taken to mean 'the fairway leading up to the hole'; if ellipsis, 'the fairway leading up to the flag'. As it would be senseless to argue about what has been left out of the sentence 'he hit the ball right down the flag' and what not, the only important inference to be drawn is that the modern trend towards metonymy does not go against the trend towards ellipsis.

Now, it can be reasoned that ellipsis or metonymy for that matter are both merely manifestations of a speaker's or writer's laziness in that they entail less

effort to produce than the full phrase they represent. It is, however, not quite as simple as this, for ellipsis and metonymy certainly lay great emphasis on what they retain, thereby probably not only shortening an utterance but also manipulating its tone to a certain extent. With this no fault can be found, if it is justified and germane to the argument or description presented, and especially if it enhances communication or explanation by being more to the point.

Where problems do arise, however, is in the case of an ellipsis that is unclear because too much has been left out or because the omission of certain words from two different phrases has results that look and sound alike but do not have the same meaning. This can of course present grave problems in a legal or financial communication. If 'loans to clients' are referred to as 'loans' in the annual financial statements of a bank, it should be fairly clear what is meant, but if loans to associated companies and subsidiaries are also referred to as 'loans', the statements may contain 'loans' as a specific item with certain supporting figures and 'loans' as a further specific item with its own figures. This might give rise to serious suspicions of double-dealing, especially if the legend accompanying the statements dares to suggest that not all 'loans' are treated with anything approaching equality when it comes to terms and conditions of repayment. It can also be reasoned that 'loans' is unclear in that it does not specify who is lending and who borrowing, but this is rather a matter for philosophers or their myrmidons, the chartered accountants, to decide.

When it comes to legal documents, any imprecise use of ellipsis could conceivably prove disastrous, which does seem to suggest that ellipsis as such is better steered clear of in legal phraseology, if the sedulous aping of the preceding clause can be forgiven. At the start of this essay it was, however, pointed out that ellipsis is one of the ways in which language develops, with the attendant implication that it is unavoidable if language has to stay alive (and even those public school scholars who were wont to compose new Latin verses in their youth are likely to attest to the great help provided by fresh ellipses in getting deceased feet to run metrically). The ellipses in a legal document (for they will be there) should in other words be controlled, as is apparent from 'The Greater Westbrooke Council (hereinafter referred to as "the Council")'. This form of ellipsis is called defining,

which alludes to an important fact about ellipsis, namely that it has many guises, and is in fact a generic name for a variety of linguistic phenomena.

In 'the rates adjusted sharply to reflect the influx of foreign exchange' the phrase 'the rates adjusted sharply' can be regarded as an elliptic form of 'the rates were adjusted sharply by the financial institutions', but linguists would be on about the question as to whether 'the rates adjusted sharply' is not in fact a logical passive but a grammatical active or perhaps some wayward vestige of the Greek Middle Voice or... . The point is, and it should be taken, that some forms of ellipsis are clear, logically feasible, and grammatically acceptable, while many others are any combination of the positive and negative versions of the foregoing. Obviously any ellipsis giving rise to a negative description such as 'unclear' should be avoided, but to brand ellipsis as such, or whatever linguistic form it represents, as being undesirable is futile.