In search of inaudible syntax in fragments
An experimental study
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Background Speakers frequently use apparently nonsentential expressions (1a), or fragments (Morgan 1973), instead of full sentences (2b).

(1)  A: Was gibt es in Hannover?  
  a. B: Eine Stadtbesichtigung oder einen Theaterbesuch.  
  b. B: Es gibt eine Stadtbesichtigung oder einen Theaterbesuch.  
  ‘What is there in Hannover?’ – ‘(There is) a city tour or a visit to a theatre’

The fact that fragments convey the same meaning as full sentences has led some researchers to assume that fragments are elliptical sentences (e.g. Merchant 2004, Reich 2007). Others (e.g. Barton & Progovac 2005, Stainton 2006) argue that fragments are genuine nonsententials. In this talk I present a series of experiments which first take case connectivity effects as evidence for unarticulated linguistic structure and then investigate the specific predictions of Merchant’s movement and deletion account.

Experiment 1  Merchant (2004) argues that DP fragments exhibit the same case morphology as they do in full sentences, while Barton & Progovac (2005) maintain that they may not have structural case features. I thus investigated with an acceptability rating study whether structural case (in German: Accusative) morphology is at least as acceptable as default case (Nominative) on fragments as (2). This would support a sentential account, as from a nonsentential perspective there is no licensor for Accusative case morphology.

In my materials, where there was a salient sentential alternative to the fragment requiring Accusative case marking, Accusative was strongly preferred over Nominative ($|z| = 8.24, p < .0001$). This supports the sentential accounts.

Experiment 2  If there is unarticulated structure in fragments, what does it look like? According to Merchant (2004), fragments undergo movement to the left periphery before ellipsis applies, while Reich (2007) argues that ellipsis occurs in situ. A straightforward approach for evaluating these accounts is to test whether movement restrictions restrict the set of possible fragments as well.

Merchant et al. (2013) report first evidence in favour of this prediction of the movement and deletion account. In their experiment 1 they find that subjects’ preference for realizing the complementizer in short answers as (3a) matches the pattern observed for topicalization of complement clauses (CCs) (3b).

(3)  What did Susan confess?  
  a. *(That) she stole from her roommate.  
  b. *(That) she stole from her roommate, she confessed.
This experiment has some potential shortcomings, as the lack of empirical data for the pattern in (3b) and the use of factive matrix verbs, which prefer CCs with overt complementizers (Kiparsky & Kiparsky 1970). A replication of the study in English and German with non-factive matrix verbs only and testing the CCs both as fragments and topics shows no significant difference between conditions in English for fragments, while in German complementizer-less CCs were significantly better as fragments, but worse as topics (see Fig. 1). This indicates that CC topicalization is not an appropriate testing ground for Merchant’s theory.

Figure 1 Mean judgments in Exp. 1.

Experiment 2  My second experiment focuses on a well-known restriction of topicalization: Multiple prefield constituents in German. In German it is widely assumed that only one constituent may precede the verb in the so-called prefield. Despite this, Müller (2003) reports many cases of double prefield constituents found in corpora. Merchant predicts only those configurations to be acceptable fragments which are acceptable in the prefield. I thus tested three presumably acceptable¹ and two ungrammatical² configurations as short answer fragments and as topics. All stimuli were presented in a context (4) (an introductory sentence is omitted here) licensing the double prefield configuration.

(4)   [Context: The waiter asks a group of guests who ordered what.]
Tim: “Wer hat denn jetzt was bestellt?”
Paul: “Ich das Schnitzel (habe bestellt)"
‘So who ordered what?’ - ‘Me the cutlet.’

Figure 2 shows significant interactions between Sentence/Fragment and most of the prefield configuration types. I discuss these data in the light of the competing theories of fragments and argue that specifically the data from the Subject + XP condition constitutes a challenge to Merchant’s theory.


¹(1) Locative + temporal PP / adverb, (2) direct + indirect object, (3) subject + adverb.
²(1) Extraction from different clauses, (2) subject + XP.