On a Special Type of Antecedentless Relative Clause in English

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Introduction

In this squib I would like to discuss a special type of antecedentless relative clause, hereafter called ARC, in English, exemplified in (1).

(1) a. What is the farthest that we can see with the naked eye?
    b. This hotel is the closest that is within walking distance to the famous Neuschwanstein castle.
    c. The nearest they could get was about 15 miles from the summit.

The construction in question has the typical form of \textit{the + farthest/closest/nearest + (that),} where the superlative of an adjective of distance is optionally followed by the complementizer \textit{that.} What is most striking about the ARC is that the expected antecedent head noun is missing. It is also worthy to note that different syntactic environments favor different complementizers or \textit{wh}-relative pronouns and that no \textit{wh}-relative adverbs are allowed in the ARC.

(2) a. John Wayne Airport is the closest which/?that is in Irvine.
    b. What is the farthest \textit{Ø}/that/?which we can see with the naked eye?
    c. The closest \textit{Ø}/that/*when they came to winning a major trophy was in the 1967–68 season.

In what follows, I first give a descriptive account of the external distribution of ARCs and the grammatical functions that the relative pronouns or operators can take in these relative clauses. I then put forth a proposal about the derivation of ARCs. I finally close the squib with a brief discussion of some theoretical implications of ARCs.

1 External Distribution of ARCs

The distribution of ARCs is very similar to that of nominal relative clauses. Consider some examples of the latter in (3).

(3) a. \textit{What happened} upset Judy.
    b. They took \textit{what the chairman offered them}.
    c. Here is \textit{where I met my wife for the first time}.
    d. You can give it to \textit{whoever you’d like to}.
The italicized clauses in (3) are called nominal relative clauses by Quirk et al. (1985) and fused relatives by Huddleston, Pullum and Peterson (2002). They serve as subject, as in (3a), or as object, as in (3b), or as subject complement, as in (3c), or as prepositional complement, as in (3d). The paradigm in which ARCs occur shows that they can have the same grammatical functions as fused relatives.

(4) a. *The nearest that they came to making a challenge* was just before the election of Giacomo da Carrara in July 1318.

b. She tried to stand up again and *the farthest she went* was hitting her chin on her cold chest.

c. *The closest that you can get to the sun without burning up* is approximately 69 miles.

(5) a. If you want to explain *the farthest they’ve reached*, that’s fine too.

b. Calculate *the closest they will be, in subsequent motion and the time this will occur*.

c. He tossed the brightly colored magazine in the trash, thinking of *the closest they’d gotten*.

(6) a. About 3-4 feet is *the farthest you can go to have clean audio*.

b. This is *the closest that you can come to flying an old plane*.

c. Point Nemo is *the farthest you can get from land without being in outer space*.

(7) a. I’ll take you farther than to *the farthest they’ve been*.

b. These are pictures taken from *the closest they would let me get*.

c. One of *the closest they have come to success in the European Championships* came in 1996.

In (4) the ARCs serve as subject, while in (5) they serve as object. The examples in (6) illustrate the subject complement use of ARCs, whereas those in (7), the prepositional complement use.

2 What Can Be Relativized in the ARC

The way the relative pronoun or operator functions within the ARC is also similar to the way the relative pronoun does so in a fused relative clause. Compare the (a) sentences with the (b) sentences in (8)-(9).

(8) a. Whoever wins this game wins $100,000.

b. This capture software is probably the closest that is free.

(9) a. They tasted what I bought.

b. Scenery like that is the closest you can imagine to the definition of *heaven*!

(10) a. He’s happy with what he is.

b. Every material unit is at its peak usefulness at the center of its symmetry, and at its least usefulness, the farthest it is from its center of symmetry.

(11) a. Where they went was San Francisco.

b. The nearest they can get to a dessert is by eating a fruit in season after the main meal.

(12) a. I have never thought of what they solved it with.

b. They say the closest they can do it for is £829.
In the fused relative clause in (8a), the *wh*-element functions as subject, and in the ARC in (8b), the relative pronoun or operator is supposed to function as subject. Just as *what* is considered the object of the verb *bought* in (9a), the relative pronoun or operator is thought of as the object of the verb *imagine* in (9b). Note that the subject complement can be relativized not only in the fused relative clause, as in (10a), but also in the ARC, as in (10b), even though the latter case is much more difficult to observe. However, examples like (11b) show that adverbials are quite easily relativized in the ARC as well as in the fused relative clause. What is relativized in (11a) is the adverbial of goal, but in (11b) it is the adverbial of manner. Finally, the examples in (12) illustrate that the prepositional complement can be relativized in both clauses. However, there is a striking difference between the two clauses in that relativizing the prepositional complement is extremely rare in the ARC.

A few more words seem to be necessary on the relativization of the adverbial in the ARC. Consider (13).

(13) a. The farthest they can make it outside their offices is inside a transit station.
    b. You can stretch the fingers to the farthest they can go.
    c. The nearest they came to publication before the present century was when Rheticus set up a few pages in type, around the year 1557.
    d. The nearest they approached to the idea was through their descriptions of a few disconnected groups of animals.
    e. The nearest they came to such an explanation was to refer to either an offender’s poor health or low intelligence.

In the ARC in (13a), the adverbial of location is relativized, but in the ARC in (13b), the adverbial of goal is relativized. In the ARC in (13c), it is the adverbial of time that is relativized. What is relativized in (13d) is the adverbial of means, but in (13e) it is the adverbial of reason.

### 3 Syntactic Derivation of ARCs

I have so far shown that the ARC is on a par with the fused relative clause with respect to the external distributions in which they occur and the way the relative pronoun or operator is interpreted internally. But unlike the fused relative clause, the ARC is a DP headed by a determiner D and involves an adjective such as *nearest, closest* or *farthest*. This implies that the ARC is most probably derived by movement of the relative pronoun or operator and subsequent ellipsis of a relevant head noun.

In fact, there is a wide range of evidence in favor of the claim that the ARC is just a type of relative clause that involves movement of the relative operator. Consider (14) and (15).

(14) a. The closest they say this asteroid could come would be 19,000 miles.
    b. The nearest we can say we have been to that is the 3-0 win over Russia.

(15) a. The nearest you believe has this service is Doetinchem.
    b. *The nearest you believe that has this service is Doetinchem.
    c. *The nearest you believe the claim that has this service is Doetinchem.
In both (14a) and (14b), the relative operator is said to originate from the complement clause of the verb *say*, which suggests that the dependency between the relative operator and the gap in the ARC can be unbounded. The ungrammaticality of (15b) and (15c) indicates that the dependency in question is governed by whatever constraint or principle is supposed to govern the dependency observed in the adnominal relative clause.\(^1\)

The facts above naturally lead us to propose that the ARC is derived in the same fashion that adnominal relatives are, but with subsequent deletion of the antecedent head noun up to recoverability, as depicted in (16).

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(16)
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As expected, a relative operator or pronoun originates in IP and moves to the specifier position of the complementizer *that* or an empty complementizer \(\varphi\). Subsequent ellipsis of the antecedent head noun results in the structure in (16).

4 Some Theoretical Implications

What remains to be accounted for is how the antecedent head noun of the ARC is deleted or elided. Before I address this issue, let me first briefly discuss two general approaches to ellipsis: syntactic/semantic and pragmatic.

The syntactic/semantic approach states that every constituent marked for ellipsis must stand in a certain relationship with a linguistic antecedent. In the syntactic approach, the relevant relationship is one of morphosyntactic identity, and in the semantic approach, it is one of mutual entailment. Cf. Hankamer and Sag (1976), Merchant (2001), Potsdam (2003), and Frazier (2008). Consider (17).

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\(^1\) The ungrammaticality of (15b) illustrates the *that*-trace effect, and (15c) is in violation of Subjacency. For more details, see Chomsky (1981).
(17) Speaker A: (attempts to stuff a 9-inch ball through a 6-inch hoop)
Speaker B: It’s not clear that you’ll be able to.
(18) Speaker A: I’m going to stuff this ball through this hoop.
Speaker B: It’s not clear that you’ll be able to.

In (18) the elided VP in speaker B’s utterance has a linguistic antecedent, *stuff this ball through this hoop*, in speaker A’s utterance. In (17), however, there is no such linguistic antecedent for the elided VP in speaker B’s utterance, resulting in the incompatibility of the utterance with the indicated context. Given this contrast, Hankamer and Sag (1976) propose that VP ellipsis is allowed only when an elided VP has a linguistic antecedent.²

Let us now consider (19), which illustrates the pragmatic approach to ellipsis.

(19) a. Water, please.
    b. Give me water, please.

Suppose a customer in a restaurant utters (19a) to a waiter. Even though it is uttered out of the blue, the waiter will be able to understand utterance (19a) as a directive like (19b). In other words, the common background of the conversationalists fills in the missing part of utterance (19a).

In the remainder of this squib, I claim that some instances of the ARC can be best dealt with by the syntactic constraint on ellipsis, and others, by the semantic/pragmatic account. Consider (1b) and (8b), repeated as (20a) and (20b), respectively.

(20) a. This hotel is the closest *hotel* that is within walking distance to the famous Neuschwanstein castle.
    b. This capture software is probably the closest *capture software* that is free.

As indicated, the missing antecedent head noun is necessarily understood to be *hotel* in (20a) and *capture software* in (20b). In both examples, the deleted head noun has a linguistic antecedent which is identical to it. Consider now the examples in (13), repeated as (21).

(21) a. The farthest they can make it outside their offices is inside a transit station.
    b. You can stretch the fingers to the farthest they can go.
    c. The nearest they came to publication before the present century was when Rheticus set up a few pages in type, around the year 1557.
    d. The nearest they approached to the idea was through their descriptions of a few disconnected groups of animals.
    e. The nearest they came to such an explanation was to refer to either an offender’s poor health or low intelligence.

In each of the sentences, the missing antecedent head noun does not have a linguistic antecedent, and no extrasentential antecedent is available. In fact, for the elided head nouns in (21), no intrasentential or extrasentential antecedents are necessary. Even if any of the sentences in (21) is uttered out of context, the meaning of the sentence or the way it is used makes it possible to retrieve the missing part of it. For example, regardless of in

² I will leave it an open question whether the constraint on VP ellipsis is syntactic or semantic. I have just cited these examples to illustrate the syntactic/semantic approach to ellipsis.
what context (21e) is uttered, we can always identify the elided head noun as *reason*.

There is empirical evidence in support of the claim that there are two sources for the ellipsis of the antecedent head noun in the ARC. Consider (22).³

(22) a. Lee’s youngest son ran away with Dawn’s oldest son.
    b. Although John’s friends were late for the rally, Mary’s friends arrived on time.

In both sentences, the ellipsis of a head noun is allowed by the occurrence of the same lexeme. Giannakidou and Stavrou (1999) argue that the sentences are instances of genuine ellipsis. They further note that this kind of ellipsis is productive, while the type of ellipsis triggered pragmatically, as in (19) is not and thus limited to conventional situations. Given this fact, let us compare the examples in (20) and those in (21). It is clear that the ellipsis shown in the former is a productive process but the ellipsis shown in the latter is not.

Whether the ellipsis exemplified by (21) is triggered semantically or pragmatically is not clear at this moment, what is obvious is that we can deduce what material is missing whenever we hear utterances like those in (21). The meaning of the rest of the sentence may be enough to retrieve the antecedent head noun in the ARC, or we may use utterances like those in (21) only in a finite number of conventional situations.

**Conclusion**

In this squib, I discussed a special type of antecedentless relative clause in English, which may illustrate genuine ellipsis of a head noun. I argued that this relative clause is derived by movement of a relative operator or pronoun and subsequent deletion of an antecedent head noun. I further showed that the ellipsis of the antecedent head noun in this construction supports not only the syntactic approach to ellipsis but also the semantic/pragmatic one.

**References**


³ (22a) is from Yakubovich (2004), and (22b), from Lobeck (1995).


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