

# SYNTACTIC ELLIPSES IN INFORMAL AMERICAN ENGLISH

(A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE LANGUAGE USED IN THE TV SERIES 'FRIENDS' AND 'HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER')

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## **Abstract**

The present research paper deals with syntactic ellipses. Three types of syntactic ellipsis – subject ellipsis, non-modal auxiliary ellipsis and subject and non-modal auxiliary ellipsis – are discussed. The issue was investigated by a comparative study. Quantitative method was used to compare the number of syntactic ellipses occurring in two American TV series – Friends and How I Met Your Mother. There is a ten-year gap between filming the two series but they share similar stories and main characters. The aim was to find out how or how much the informal sitcom language has changed over the years. The first part of the paper provides the essential theory of the analysed clause elements. The purpose of the practical part was to analyse and comment on the types of syntactic ellipses found in the two series and provide examples from the series. Finally, the research results were interpreted. They show that the informal sitcom American language has not changed over the years.

**Key Words:** syntactic ellipsis, informal language, American English, TV series

## **Abstrakt**

Témou predloženej práce sú syntaktické elipsy. Predmetom analýzy sú tri typy syntaktických elíps – podmetová elipsa, elipsa pomocného slovesa a elipsa podmetu a zároveň pomocného slovesa. Dáta boli spracované formou porovnávacej štúdie. Na porovnanie počtu syntaktických elíps, ktoré sa objavili v dvoch amerických televíznych seriáloch – Friends (Priatelia) a How I Met Your Mother (Ako som spoznal vašu mamu) – bola použitá kvantitatívna metóda výskumu. Medzi produkciou analyzovaných epizód dvoch predmetných televíznych seriálov je rozdiel desať rokov, avšak seriály majú podobný dej a postavy. Cieľom bolo zistiť, ako, prípadne do akej miery sa za roky zmenil neformálny jazyk používaný v sitkomoch. Prvá časť práce uvádza základné teoretické poznatky o analyzovaných vetných členoch. Účelom druhej, praktickej časti práce bola analýza jednotlivých typov syntaktických elíps spozorovaných v predmetných televíznych seriáloch. Posledná časť práce ponúka interpretáciu výsledkov výskumu, ktoré ukázali, že neformálna americká angličtina používaná v sitkomoch sa počas rokov nezmenila.

**Kľúčové slová:** syntaktická elipsa, neformálny jazyk, americká angličtina, televízny seriál

## **Introduction**

Grammar course books introduce several rules for the use of individual clause elements. Though, the goal of conversations is not always the use of proper grammar but the intelligibility of the message. This explains why rules of syntax and of grammar are not always obeyed, especially in informal communication. Function words are sometimes omitted in sentences. This paper deals with such omissions – with so-called *syntactic ellipses*. The use of such informal clause alternatives will be demonstrated in the language of two American sitcoms, one from 1994 and one from 2005. Has the informal sitcom language changed over the years?

## 1 Theoretical background

### 1.1 Clause elements, syntax

Syntax is a branch of linguistics dealing with sentences. It discusses relationships, function and form of elements in a sentence and relationships of clauses among each other. Basic clause elements are *subject*, *predicate*, *complement*, *object*, *attribute* and *adverbial* (Rafajlovičová, 2012). This paper discusses two of the clause elements: *subject* and *non-modal auxiliary (predicate)*.

### 1.2 Subject

As defined in the Password dictionary, subject stands for the **agent (doer)** of an action which is expressed by a verb (Kernemann, 2008). Word classes typically fulfilling the function of a subject are nouns and pronouns. The subject is an obligatory clause element (Rafajlovičová, 2012). There is a special type of subject called *dummy subject*<sup>1</sup>. It is mostly realised by pronoun *it* (e.g. It is snowing.) and has no semantic function, it only takes place of a subject, as in English clauses subject has to be present (Biber, 1999).

### 1.3 Non-modal auxiliaries (Predicate)

Non-modal auxiliaries form a category of verbs. A verb is an obligatory clause element, it forms the **predicate** and is the core of a sentence<sup>2</sup>. Verbs can be divided into main and auxiliary ones based on the meaning they carry. Main verbs belong to lexical words as they communicate some meaning. Auxiliary verbs belong to grammatical words i.e. they carry some grammatical function. Auxiliary verbs are further divided into modal and non-modal auxiliaries. Modal auxiliaries carry modal meaning and so they modify the meaning of main verbs while non-modal auxiliaries, also called primary verbs (*be*, *do*, *have*), do not carry any lexical meaning (Kačmárová, 2013).

## 2 Aim

The basic aim of the paper was to point out the differences between grammatical theory and practice. All types of syntactic ellipsis (as a type of informal clause alternative) observed were provided with examples from the two selected series. The main aim of the paper was to compare the language of the two series, as their plots take place in different time. The main objective was to find out how or how much the sitcom language (informal language in spoken communication), in case of this paper the informal American English, has changed.

## 3 Hypothesis

The assumption created was that the language of the older one of the two analysed TV series i.e. *Friends* follows grammar rules more strictly, thus the language of the younger one of the two series i.e. *How I Met Your Mother (HIMYM)* is more informal, colloquial. There would then be more syntactic ellipses found in the newer series. These expectations were based on the belief that the language of informal spoken interaction, in this case applying on the sitcom American English, has changed over time and that it has become even more informal.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://grammar.about.com/od/d/g/Dummy-It.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://partofspeech.org/verb/>

## 4 Methodology

In the research, a quantitative method of analysis was used. First, there was a certain hypothesis stated, which was then to be proven right or wrong. In the four selected episodes of both discussed series, the cases of syntactic ellipsis were counted and analysed. Three types of syntactic ellipses to be counted and further analysed were set beforehand. The types chosen were *subject ellipsis*, *non-modal auxiliary ellipsis*, *subject and non-modal auxiliary ellipsis*. Finally, the results of the research were interpreted and further implications were suggested.

## 5 Corpora

The practical part of the paper focuses on the analysis of informal clause alternatives – syntactic ellipses – occurring in two **American TV series**, *Friends* and *How I Met Your Mother* (*HIMYM*). The material for analysis was obtained from unofficial scripts of the series available on the internet. Four episodes of the first seasons of each series were chosen as the corpora material.

Both discussed series are sitcoms which implies everyday situations and conversations. The language in the series is **colloquial** i.e. **informal**. Language of both series is American English. Both stories take place in New York and both series tell a story of a group of friends. *HIMYM* has 5 main characters (3 men and 2 women), *Friends* has 6 main characters (3 men and 3 women). Between filming of the selected seasons of the two series there was a gap of approximately 10 years. The first season of *Friends* was filmed in 1994, while the first season of *HIMYM* was filmed in 2005.

## 6 Findings

### 6.1 Types of syntactic ellipses

Function words e.g. subject pronouns, unstressed auxiliaries or both are often elided in speech as they are recoverable from the context (Biber, 1999). The following types of syntactic ellipsis were analysed: *subject ellipsis*, *non-modal auxiliary ellipsis*, *subject and non-modal auxiliary ellipsis*.

#### 1. Subject ellipsis

Subject ellipsis typically occurred in *statements*. In statements, subject takes the first position in a sentence. The examples of subject ellipsis show that the types of subject predominantly elided are pronouns *I* and *it*. These can be easily recovered from the context. The pronoun *it* was mostly the above mentioned *dummy it*.

Types of sentences with subject ellipsis found in the corpora:

##### a) Statements

„Looks like I was second to last.“

„Sounds like a date to me.“

##### b) Sentences addressing a person

„Kind of stepped on my point, Mon.“

##### c) Very informal sentences

„Sup?“

## 2. Non-modal auxiliary ellipsis

Non-modal auxiliary ellipsis occurred predominantly in *questions*. In questions, a verb takes the first position in a sentence. As was mentioned above, non-modal auxiliaries do not carry any lexical meaning and so they do not change the meaning of utterances. The fact that they belong to function words and are recoverable from the context allows their ellipsis.

Types of sentences with non-modal auxiliary ellipsis found in the corpora:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| a) <u>Questions</u><br>„Anybody hungry?“<br>„You okay?“                                   | e) <u>Sentences with „got to“ or „gotta“</u><br>„I gotta get one of those blue French horns for over my fireplace.“ |
| b) <u>Statements</u><br>„I got four sixes.“   | f) <u>Questions beginning with „You know what?“</u><br>„You know what that is?“                                     |
| c) <u>Sentences with „’d better“</u><br>„You better act surprised.“                       | g) <u>Exclamations and sentences expressing surprise</u><br>„You love me?“<br>„You kidding?!“                       |
| d) <u>Questions expecting a positive answer</u><br>„Hey, you wanna do something tonight?“ |   |

## 3. Subject and non-modal auxiliary ellipsis

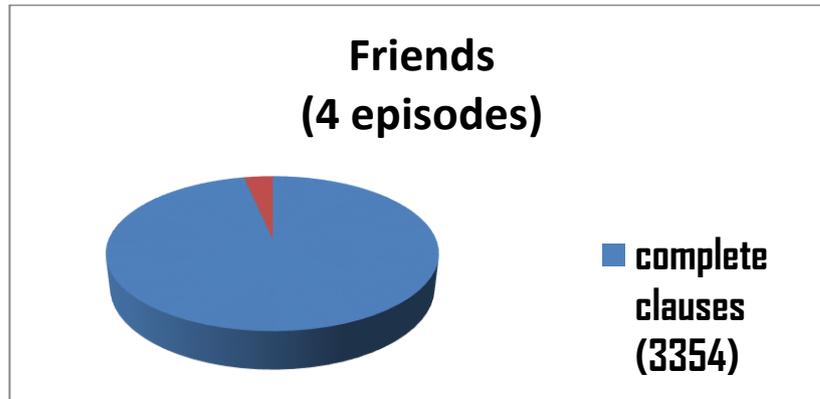
In several sentences both subject and non-modal auxiliary were elided. This type of ellipsis was found in both of the analysed TV series. Such sentences strongly depend on the situational or linguistic context and they contribute to the informal character of the conversation. Such clauses found in the analysed texts were in most cases expressive and emotional.

Types of sentences with subject and non-modal auxiliary ellipsis found in the corpora:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| a) <u>Statements</u><br>„Got it.“<br>„Listen, something you should know.“<br>„Never gonna happen.“ | d) <u>Repetition, similar sentences</u><br>„I can't be a waitress anymore.<br>I'm sick of the lousy tips.<br>Sick of being called "Excuse Me."“ |
| b) <u>Questions</u><br>„Remember my brother Ross?“   |   |
| c) <u>Questions with „See?“</u><br>„See that girl?“  |   |

## 6.2 Statistics

Four episodes of *HIMYM* and *Friends* were compared. In *Friends* episodes 3470 clauses were counted. Out of these clauses, 116 were elliptical, which represents 3.34% of all clauses.



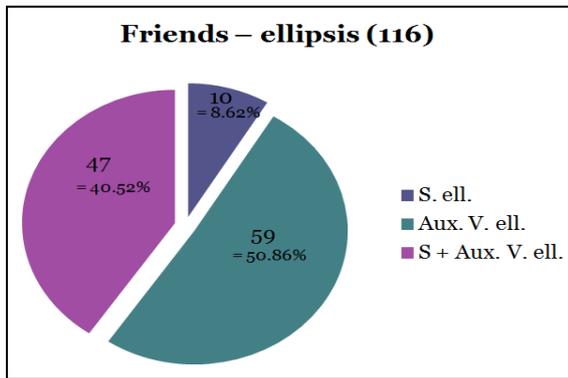
Graph 1 Number of complete clauses and ellipses in the analysed *Friends* episodes

In *HIMYM* episodes 4280 clauses were counted. In 92 clauses, ellipsis occurred in 1.14% of the clauses.

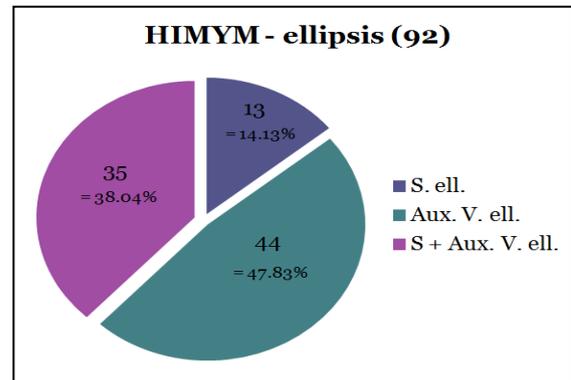


Graph 2 Number of complete clauses and ellipses in the analysed *HIMYM* episodes

The ellipses in the episodes were divided into the 3 groups: subject ellipsis, auxiliary verb ellipsis and the combination of both, subject + auxiliary verb ellipsis. The graphs above show that the overall number of ellipses in both TV series was rather low. Regarding the number of individual types of ellipsis, the results in the *Friends* and *HIMYM* episodes were similar (compare Graph 3 and Graph 4). The lowest number of all counted ellipses was the number of the subject ellipses – 10 (8.62%) in *HIMYM* and 13 (14.13%) in *Friends*. Subject + auxiliary verb ellipses appeared in the *Friends* episodes 47 times (40.52% of all ellipses) and 35 times (38.04%) in the *HIMYM* episodes. The largest group of ellipses was formed by non-modal auxiliary ellipses – 59 (50.86%) ellipses in *Friends* and 44 (47.83%) ellipses in the *HIMYM* episodes.



Graph 3 The division of ellipses in *Friends*



Graph 4 The division of ellipses in *HIMYM*

### Ellipses in questions vs. in statements

Based on the previous findings regarding the types of sentences typical for each ellipsis (subject ellipsis typically occurred in statements while non-modal auxiliary ellipsis in questions), the newly set additional point of the research was to find out how many times subject, auxiliary and subject + auxiliary verb ellipses appeared in statements and questions. In this case, the results of the two series were different:

Friends	Questions	Statements
Subj. ell.	0	10
Aux. V. ell.	30	29
S + Aux. V. ell.	27	20
Total	57 (49.13%)	59 (50.87%)

Table 1 Ellipses in questions and statements in *Friends*

HIMYM	Questions	Statements
Subj. ell.	2	11
Aux. V. ell.	27	17
S + Aux. V. ell.	9	26
Total	38 (41.30%)	54 (58.70%)

Table 2 Ellipses in questions and statements in *HIMYM*

According to Table 1 and Table 2, the ellipses appeared more frequently in statements than in questions. However, it is important to state that in this kind of texts there is a significantly higher number of statements than the number of questions. This then suggests that the number of ellipses in questions is relatively high.

Non-modal auxiliary ellipsis which appeared to be typical for questions showed quite surprising results in *Friends*. The number of auxiliary ellipses in statements and questions was almost even.

In one of the categories, namely subject + auxiliary verb ellipsis, the number of ellipses in the *Friends* and *HIMYM* episodes was different when comparing elliptical questions and statements. In *Friends* there were more ellipses in questions (27 vs. 20 in statements), while in *HIMYM* more ellipses occurred in statements (9 vs. 26 in questions).

In total, the number of the ellipses in questions and statements in *Friends* was rather equal (57 questions vs. 59 statements) comparing to *HIMYM* (38 questions vs. 54 statements) which showed slightly higher rate of elliptical statements than questions.

## 7 Results

Syntactic ellipses are not so rare in informal spoken English. They function as informal alternatives of sentences which normally respect basic syntactic rules and so they contribute to the informal nature of communication.

It was the first element of a sentence or the first two element of the sentence which tended to be elided in informal conversations in the two studied TV series. That means the **subject** was mostly **omitted in statements** while the **non-modal auxiliary in questions**. Ellipsis of both subject and auxiliary showed relatively different representation in the two series. Elements which were commonly **elided were functional words** such as subject pronouns, unstressed auxiliaries i.e. words easily recoverable from the context.

As the findings suggest, informal spoken language, more precisely **sitcom language** (in this case American English) **has not changed** that much over the 10 years between production of the two discussed series when judging by the number of syntactic ellipses occurring in the series. Language has not become more informal i.e. the stated hypothesis proved wrong. The older TV series *Friends* showed to be even more informal than its younger „fellow“ *HIMYM*. More ellipses were found in *Friends* than in *HIMYM*.

## Conclusion

The paper focuses on clause elements and their ellipsis in sitcom conversations. Clause elements belong to the field of syntax. However, what showed to be the main factor in the analysis is *pragmatics*. Pragmatics, according to the definition provided by George Yule, is "the study of how more gets communicated than is said" (1996: 3). As long as the message is understandable, everything is all right. Even if the sentences seem to be „missing“ some parts from the point of view of standard grammar – e.g. in cases of syntactic ellipses – they are acceptable in informal communication. Sentences never stand alone, they always belong to a certain context which allows language economy and flexibility.

As was already presented in research results, informal sitcom language (in this case American English) has not really changed over 10 years. Language has not become more informal. The older TV series *Friends* showed to be even more informal. More ellipses were found in *Friends*. This could be explained by the fact that *HIMYM* has a narrator, Ted Mosby, who is the main character of the story. That means in *Friends* there are more dialogues than in *HIMYM* where also numerous monologues of the narrator can be found. More dialogues imply more conversation and more ellipses. Another reason of higher number of syntactic ellipses in *Friends* could be the

fact that the series features more women characters (also the overall number of main characters is higher). Generally, women are said to talk more, which also implies more dialogues and more ellipses.

In informal spoken interactions, *language economy* can be observed. Informal language uses ellipsis as well as other means of language economy. It could be of help if these were introduced to the learners of English and maybe discussed and practiced in the process of learning. Such informal language phenomena could be acquired during university studies (when studying English), or even earlier, e.g. at secondary grammar schools, as they form an essential part of the pragmatic competence, which in many cases of language interaction is even more important than the use of proper grammar.

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