

# Comparative Accounts of the Omission of Subjects in Instruction and Question Utterances

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**Abstract** Japanese is known to be a highly elliptical language for grammatical and cultural reasons. In contrast, English technically does not allow any constituents to be ellipted. Nevertheless, ellipsis is in practice frequently observed, especially in spoken language. In this paper, I focus on the omission of subjects and investigate, based on English and Japanese map task dialogues, how subjects are omitted in English utterances, compared with the omission of subjects in Japanese utterances. Additionally, I examine the relationship between the form and function of clauses whose subjects are omitted, focusing on instruction and question utterances, which include two main speech acts in the map task dialogues. The analysis reveals that although subjects are frequently omitted in both English and Japanese utterances, the omission of the subject in English clauses accompanies the omission of a particular element of the verb which deals with the finiteness of the verb. Moreover, subject omission is not observed in instruction utterances in the English dialogues, which makes a sharp contrast to the Japanese dialogues.

Keywords: ellipsis, spoken language, comparative grammar

## 1 Introduction

Japanese discourse is well known to be highly elliptical. In fact, all the constituents are not always realised in real discourse, as observed in Fry (2003): “normally obligatory syntactic elements are required for the full meaning in a neutral or null

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context” (p. 82). Especially, subject ellipsis is extremely common in Japanese; it is reported that subject ellipsis in Japanese occurs as much as 74% of the time in conversation discourse (National Language Research Institute, 1955). Apart from the textual function of ellipsis, including making cohesion in text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976), Japanese ellipsis often serves to create indirectness, subtlety, emphasis (Nariyama, 2000), avoid commitment, evade responsibility, and show politeness (Okamoto, 1985). Three factors which encourage speakers of Japanese to use ellipsis can be pointed out. First, there is less syntactic pressure, compared with English grammar. Lack of constituents does not always result in ungrammaticality, which makes ellipsis occur even more than in English. Second, there are well-equipped systems to detect ellipted elements. For instance, honorific language indicates the agent of the denoted action even without a subject. Moreover, beneficial verbs are equipped with a developed system of showing which way benefit goes; there are compound verbs that end with *-ageru* ‘give’ or *-morau* ‘receive’. Third, cultural preference for subtlety and implicitness in face-to-face communication can be considered as facilitators for the use of ellipsis. Shibatani (1990) points out that “it is the person’s ability to arrive at an intended conclusion rather than the logical presentation that is evaluated” (p. 390).

In contrast, English grammar requires every constituent in the sentence to be present; it does not allow any of the constituents to be missing. However, ellipsis is in practice frequently observed in English discourse, especially in spoken language. In actual discourse, it contributes to creating cohesion and emphasis as found in Japanese discourse. With regard to interpersonal effects, informality is pointed out (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). Nariyama (2004) also claims that ellipsis brings closeness between participants and its evasiveness can also discourage any response with meaningful content from the addressee, which can interrupt discourse coherence. Thus, whether in English or Japanese, ellipsis bears many functions at various levels: making conversation terse, creating cohesion and produce pragmatic effects, which provide communication with dynamicity. Imagine conversation

without ellipsis. It would sound monotonous and it would not be easy to see the point which the interlocutor wants to make. Ellipsis is then crucial for appropriate communication.

In this paper, I focus on the omission of subjects in sentences and investigate how subjects, which are extremely frequently omitted in Japanese discourse, are also omitted in English discourse. The aim of this research is then to give an account of the difference in omission of subjects between English and Japanese discourse with regard to the relationship between form and function. I will therefore focus on the following research questions.

- In which circumstances, is the subject omitted in English dialogues?
- Are there any differences in the relation of ellipsis to speech acts which are associated with the elliptical utterances between English and Japanese dialogues?

To answer these questions, I look at dialogues from English and Japanese map task corpora (the HCRC Map Task Corpus and the Chiba Map Task Corpus). The reason why I chose this rather specific genre as data is twofold. First, they are parallel corpora; the two map task corpora were collected cross-linguistically under the same conditions in terms of their design, setting and participants, which to some extent guarantees ample occurrences of ellipsis as the ‘language-in-action’ type of speech is the genre which contains more ellipsis than others (Carter & McCarthy, 1995). Additionally, as the context in which the speech takes place is cross-linguistically the same, the same types of speech acts can be expected to be observed in the dialogues, which enables an investigation of the correlation between form and function of elliptical utterances. With regard to function, I look at two speech acts, that is, instruction and question in the dialogues. This is because the map task dialogue consists mainly of a type of substage (i.e. Task-performance substage) which includes these two speech acts.

This paper is structured as follows: the next section gives an overview of ellipsis. Following the literature review section, I describe the data used for this

study: map task dialogues. I then move on to an analysis of omission of subjects and the relationship between elliptical forms and their functions. After presenting the association between speech acts and particular ellipsis types, I give a cross-linguistic explanation for this result.

## 2 Form and Function of Ellipsis

In this section, I give an overview of ellipsis with regard to its form and function. Ellipsis includes too various phenomena to be described under a term, ellipsis. Different researchers then look at different aspects of ellipsis under the different names for the phenomenon in question. To make what the term ‘ellipsis’ refers to untangled, I present the following three major criteria for taxonomy of ellipsis.

### 1. What elements in clauses are ellipped?

According to the elements which are ellipped, the phenomenon changes its name, for example, gapping, stranding and sluicing. Gapping is a process that ellipses a verb, which can be anaphorically retrieved from the neighbouring clauses in coordinate or comparative sentences; for example, *John prepared salad and Mary soup*. Stranding leaves in only auxiliary verbs and ellipses the rest of the verb phrase; for example, *She invited me to go with them, which I'd quite like to* (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 1519). Sluicing leaves in only wh-words in subordinate clauses; for example, *We need to ask someone, but we don't know who* (McShane, 2005, p. 144).

### 2. Whether ellipped elements are recovered verbatim?

If the ellipped elements are recovered verbatim, the ellipsis is called strict ellipsis; for instance, I'm happy if you are (*happy*). If the exact words to get the elliptical sentence reconstructed are not determined unambiguously, it is weak ellipsis, as found in *Did you get it?* and *Do you get it?* for *Get it?*

### 3. Where are the ellipped elements recovered?

The third point for the taxonomy of ellipsis is whether the ellipped elements

are recovered linguistically, non-linguistically or grammatical knowledge. The expression ‘linguistically recover’ means that the ellipated elements are reconstructed by looking at the neighbouring text in which it occurs. In this case, the ellipsis is categorised into textual ellipsis. In contrast, ‘non-linguistically recovered’ ellipsis is the one whereby the ellipated elements are recovered by looking at the non-linguistic context outside the text, that is, the context in which the discourse takes place. This is situational ellipsis. If grammatical knowledge is required to retrieve the missing elements, it is structural ellipsis. These three kinds of ellipsis are exemplified as follows:

(1) She might sing tonight, but I don’t think that she will (sing tonight).

[textual ellipsis] (Quirk et al., 1985, p.862)

(2) (I am) Glad to see you.

[situational ellipsis]

(3) I believe (that) you are wrong.

[structural ellipsis]

(Quirk et al., 1985, p.888)

With regard to function, ellipsis contributes to creating cohesion and interactional effects among speakers. Thus, the functions are categorised into two types. One of them is cohesive function, which is generally associated with referential chains. It is well known that a topic is established by full noun phrases and maintained by pronouns or null anaphora (ellipsis). As a result, ellipsis contributes to making emphasis or contrast of particular pieces of information in discourse; if speakers emphasise a particular piece of information, the rest of the sentence can be ellipated. In other words, the omission of elements which hearers can retrieve complies with the Maxims of Quantity and Manner. The other function is interpersonal function. As mentioned above, informality is usually associated with ellipsis as ellipsis frequently occurs in casual conversation among people close to each other. Ellipsis is in fact associated with positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In contrast, ellipsis can also indicate a lack of commitment to something or even unfriendliness as ellipsis can make utterances sound evasive and dismissive

(Nariyama, 2004). Thus, ellipsis contributes to create textual and interactional effects among speakers.

### **3 Characterisations of Map Task Dialogues**

#### **3.1 Map Task Corpus**

The HCRC Map task corpus was made by HCRC (Human Communication Research Centre), a joint research body at the University of Edinburgh and Glasgow University in 1990s. It is a collection of dialogues in which map task is done. Map task is originally a task for language learning. Two people make a pair and each of them has a map containing several landmarks. Along with landmarks, one map also includes a route on it, while the other does not. A person whose map includes a route gives instructions to the other so that the other person can draw a route on her own map. The Japanese version of the corpus (the Chiba Map Task Corpus) was also made later at Chiba University, following the design of the English map task corpus. Variables are then the same in both corpora: availability of eye contact, participant familiarity and participant role (whether the task is the first or second time for each participant). The difference between the two corpora lies in the equipment with which dialogues were collected: for the eye contact availability variable, in the Japanese corpus, two participants were in different rooms with headphones, while in the English corpus they share the same room (with / without partition for the eye contact variable).

#### **3.2 Discourse Structure of the Map Task Dialogues**

A map task dialogue consists of three stages: Opening, Task-performance and Closing. This is common in both languages. The Task-performance stage is divided into numerous substages which in turn contain at most three sub-substages (Querying landmarks, Giving instructions and Querying instructions). The structure of the substage is equivalent to the four-position structure of pre-request sequence in conversation analysis (Merritt, 1976, Levinson, 1983). The discourse structure of

the substage including sub-substages can be schematised in Figure 1.

The instruction giver (henceforth the Giver) asks whether there are particular landmarks on the instruction follower (henceforth the Follower)’s map (Querying landmarks sub-substage). If the Follower’s map has the landmark, the Giver gives an instruction using the landmark in question, and the Follower acknowledges the instruction by drawing a route on her map (Giving instructions sub-substage). Sometimes, the Follower asks for more information about the instruction which has been given to clarify the content of the instruction (Querying instructions sub-substage). Thus, Querying landmarks and Giving instructions are obligatory sub-substages, while Querying instructions sub-substage is optional.

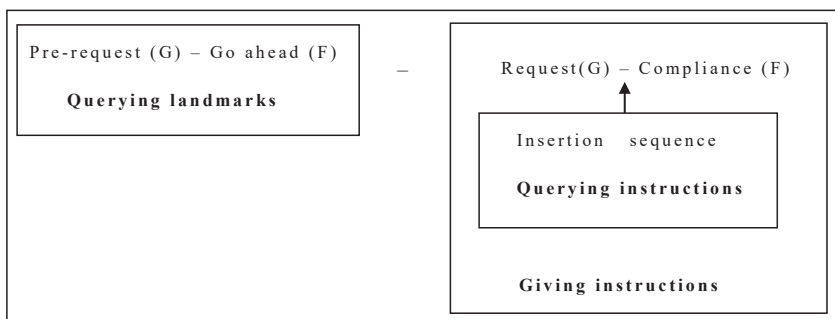


Figure 1. Task-performance substage and its three sub-substages

### 3.3 Preliminary Tasks

Sixteen dialogues were chosen from each corpus. Since the Japanese dialogues are simply in the form of transcripts, rearrangement was needed, based on the format found in the HCRC Map Task Corpus, for the comparative analysis; additionally, move (a functional unit of utterance) annotation for the functional analysis was added to the Japanese rearranged transcripts. After the rearrangement was done, all the clauses in the sixteen dialogues were counted. Elliptical clauses were then identified and syntactic categories of missing constituents were determined based on systemic functional grammar. As mentioned earlier, the term ‘ellipsis’ includes such

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a wide range of phenomena that it is not straightforward to give a comprehensive definition of ellipsis. In this research, an elliptical clause is defined as a clause which does not contain one or more of the following: Subject, Finite, Predicator, Complement and Adjunct. The ellipsed elements are recovered linguistically or non-linguistically. The above terms for the constituents are derived from syntactic categories used in systemic functional grammar. A Subject is equivalent to the subject in other approaches. A Finite is an operator which deals with tense, polarity and mood, such as *be* as well as auxiliary verbs including *do*, *can*, *may*, *must* and so on. It deals with the finiteness of the verb. A Predicator is the lexical component of the verb phrase; a Finite and a Predicator comprise the verb phrase. A Complement is similar to a constituent which is widely recognised as an object, but it also can function as a complement in other approaches. An Adjunct is a grammatically optional element, such as adverbial phrases.

I will briefly explain why I chose systemic functional grammar as a theoretical framework for this study. First, systemic functional grammar is a particular view of language, which offers means for functional evaluation of text as well as formal categories such as the Subject and Finite. This allows for the execution of comparative work. Secondly, systemic functional grammar makes it possible to examine the paradigmatic aspect of language. This is crucial for pragmatic investigation as pragmatics looks at the ways of saying something to accomplish a certain speech act and factors that influence the decision to choose one way not another. Finally, linguistic features at various levels, i.e. from micro to macro aspects of the language, can be described; in other words, systemic functional grammar deals with the analysis of language at the level of both lexico-grammar and language use in context. For these reasons, the theoretical framework fits the purpose of the study.

### 4 Elliptical Forms in Instructions and Questions

The English sixteen dialogues contain 1838 clauses in total; out of them, 506



clauses are elliptical, which account for 27.5% of all the clauses. The Japanese sixteen clauses include 2404 clauses in total, out of which 1625 clauses, that is, 67.6% of all the clauses, are elliptical. Table 1 indicates the types of ellipsis which are observed in the sixteen dialogues from each corpus.

**Table 1.** *Possible types of ellipsis in the map task dialogues*

English	Japanese
Subject	Subject
Finite	Finite
Predicator	Predicator
Subject+Finite	Subject+Finite
Subject+Finite+Predicator	Subject+Finite+Predicator
Predicator+Complement	
Subject+Finite+Predicator +Adjunct	
Subject+Finite+Predicator +Complement	Subject+Complement
(Others)	Finite+Predicator (Others)

Subject ellipsis, along with Finite ellipsis, Predicator ellipsis, Subject+Finite ellipsis and Subject+Finite+Predicator ellipsis, is common to both the English and Japanese dialogues. The category ‘Others’ represents some types of ellipsis whose occurrences are too rare to form their categories. The excerpts (4) and (5) show examples of Subject ellipsis in the English and Japanese dialogues respectively.

**(4) Move 62 query-yn, Giver**

Do you see the carved wooden pole?

**Move 64 reply-n, Follower**

Ehm no

**Move 65 explain, Giver**

( ∅ ) don't have one

(Dialogue q5nc5)

**(5) Move 146 instruct, Giver**

*De<...>soko-no kibori-no... hashira- no shita-o too...tte*  
then that-GEN curved-GEN wooden.pole- GEN under-ACC go.through  
‘Then, going through under that curved wooden pole’

**Move 147 acknowledge, Follower**

*Un*  
right  
‘Right.’

**Move 148 check, Follower**

\**A ue-ni-agaru no ja*  
oh go.up FP<sub>i</sub> then  
‘Oh, ( ∅ ) go up then?’

(Dialogue j5e5)

Move 65 in (4) includes situational ellipsis, where ‘I’ could be reconstructed for the missing Subject. In Move 148 in (5), the Follower asks about the direction to be taken, interrupting the Giver’s instruction utterance. The Follower omits the Subject, i.e. the agent of the motion of ‘going up’.

Although Subject ellipsis is observed in the dialogues in the two languages, with regard to the frequency of occurrence of each type of ellipsis, in the English dialogues Subject+Finite ellipsis is the most common type of ellipsis, while in the Japanese dialogues Subject ellipsis is the most prevalent. These are exemplified in Table 2 and 3.

**Table 2.** *Frequency of occurrence of ellipsis types in the English dialogues*

<b>S</b>	<b>SF</b>	<b>SFP</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>SFPC</b>	<b>SFPA</b>	<b>PC</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Total</b>
12	260	117	65	5	3	20	24	506
0.7%	14.1%	6.2%	3.5%	0.3%	0.2%	1.1%	1.3%	27.5%

**Table 3.** *Frequency of occurrence of ellipsis types in the Japanese dialogues*

<b>S</b>	<b>SF</b>	<b>SFP</b>	<b>FP</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>SC</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Total</b>
1128	126	201	41	46	59	24	1625
46.9%	5.2%	8.4%	1.7%	1.9%	2.5%	1.0%	67.6%

Occurrence of Subject ellipsis in the English dialogues is rare, compared with the extremely frequent use of Subject ellipsis in the Japanese dialogues. In fact, when the Subject is omitted in the English dialogues, it is omitted along with the Finite (Subject+Finite ellipsis) or the Finite plus the Predicator (Subject+Finite+Predicator ellipsis).

So far, it is observed that Subject omission in the English dialogues is not as common as in the Japanese dialogues. In fact when the Subject is omitted, the Finite (and the Predicator) are also omitted, and the ellipsis of the Subject and Finite is the most common type of ellipsis in the English dialogues. I then looked at the most salient types of ellipsis from each corpus, i.e. Subject+Finite ellipsis and Subject ellipsis, in relation to speech acts which are associated with them. As found in Figure 1, the main speech acts in the map task dialogues are ‘giving instructions’ and ‘asking questions’. The HCRC Map Task Corpus is provided with move annotation in the transcript. There are twelve types of move in the annotation scheme: [instruct], [explain], [check], [align], [query-yn], [query-w], [acknowledge], [reply-y], [reply-n], [reply-w], [clarify] and [ready]. Out of the twelve moves, the [instruct] move is associated with the giving instruction speech act, and the moves [check], [align],

[query-yn] and [query-w] are related to the asking question speech act. Table 4 summarises the association between move types and ellipsis types which occur most in the clauses with these move types.

**Table 4.** *Association of speech acts and ellipsis types in the English and Japanese dialogues*

		<i>Ellipsis types</i>	
		<b>English</b>	<b>Japanese</b>
<b>Giving instruction</b>	[instruct]	P	S
<b>Asking question</b>	[check]	SF	S, SFP,
	[align]	SF	SF, S
	[query-yn]	SF	S, FP
	[query-w]	SF	S,SFP

From the table, it can be pointed out that (i) the giving instruction speech act is associated with Predicator ellipsis in the English dialogues and Subject ellipsis in the Japanese dialogues, (ii) the asking question speech act is related to Subject+Finite ellipsis in the English dialogues and Subject ellipsis in the Japanese dialogues.

As for (i), in the English dialogues, Predicator ellipsis is in fact favoured by the [instruct], [reply-y] and [clarify] moves. Move 56 in the excerpt (6) shows an example of Predicator ellipsis with the [instruct] move.

**(6) Move 56 instruct, Giver**

go down ... eh about an inch and a half ... ( ∅ ) directly down

**Move 57 query-yn, Follower**

from the abandoned truck?

**Move 58 reply-y, Giver**

Yeah

(Dialogue q3nc6)

This is an example of textual ellipsis as the ellipted Predicator is reconstructed by looking back the preceding part of the utterance. Predicator ellipsis results in an adverbial ‘directly down’. The ellipsis has an effect that the direction of drawing the route is emphasised. Subject ellipsis in the Japanese instructions is exemplified in (7). As what the missing Subject refers to is reconstructed by the context in which the utterance is found, it is situational ellipsis.

**(7) Move 151 instruct, Giver**

*Kibori-no hashira-no shita-o tooru n da yo*  
curved-GEN wooden.pole-GEN under-ACC go.through NMLS COP FPa  
'( ∅ ) go through under the curved wooden pole.'

(Dialogue j5e5)

Subject ellipsis has an effect that it serves to make the agent of the denoted verb, i.e. *tooru* ‘go through’, unclear. This unambiguous agent seems to have a pragmatic effect that the Giver does not sound as if she gives the instruction, which mitigates the command-like flavour of instruction utterances. In fact, what the missing Subjects refer to in clauses with the [instruct] move are never revealed in the sixteen dialogues. Thus, different types of ellipsis are observed in the giving instruction speech act between the English and Japanese dialogues. Subject ellipsis is only found in the Japanese instruction utterances and the effect brought about by the use of ellipsis is interpersonal.

With regard to (ii), I will give an explanation for this association between the speech act and the salient types of ellipsis in the English and Japanese dialogues. The Subjects commonly ellipted in Subject+Finite ellipsis in my English data are

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*it* and *that*. Subject+Finite ellipsis is frequently used in the ‘Querying instructions’ sub-substage in the Task-performance stage, which is associated with the moves [check] and [query-w]. When the information about how to draw a route is sought in the ‘Querying instructions’ sub-substage, the discourse topic is a route. When the topic is realised as an omitted Subject in elliptical clauses, it is a two-step process. Recall that the Querying instructions sub-substage follows the Giving instructions sub-substage. The former is asking for more information about the instruction which has been given in the latter, and at this point the content of the instruction can be treated as background information, and represented by the third person pronoun *it* or the demonstrative proform *that* as seen in (8):

### (8) Move 128 instruct, Giver

so ehm ... I want you to come down to ... two thirds of the way ... between ... eh  
rock fall and banana tree ... have

### Move 129 check, Follower

is that ... two thirds beneath banana tree or two thirds up?

### Move 130 clarify, Giver

Two t-- eh that's two third beneath banana tree

### Move 131 acknowledge, Follower

Right

(Dialogue q4ec8)

The demonstrative proform *that* in Move 129 takes over the content of the instruction which has been presented in Move 128. The demonstrative proform *that* (and the third person *it*) then refer to the preceding clause in the [instruct] move containing the overt first or second person pronouns (as found in Move 128). As

the second step, the verb *be* is frequently ellipped together with *it* and *that*. This is how Subject+Finite ellipsis is frequently observed in asking questions in the English dialogues. The exchange found in (9) shows that the reconstructed Subject refers to the instruction by the Giver.

**(9) Move 83 instruct, Giver**

you want to... ..eh curve down to your...at the side of the...at the rapids a few centimetres out from them

**Move 84 query-w, Follower**

how many (is it)?

(Dialogue q6nc6)

In contrast, when the Japanese participants are talking about the manner in which the route should be drawn, Subject ellipsis occurs; the two steps which are observed in the English dialogues are not found in the Japanese dialogues. The Subject is ellipped on its own without any other constituents. Also, the identification of the ellipped Subject is almost never explicitly revealed. Thus, different linguistic forms are used in the English and Japanese dialogues to refer to the route to be drawn by the participants, which seems to affect the form of Subject omission in the two languages.

Apart from the different use of pronouns in the two languages regarding choosing the form of the Subject for clauses with the speech act of asking questions about instructions, syntactic differences between the two languages appears to be partly responsible for the different distribution of ellipsis types in that speech act. Syntactically, it is not very common for English clauses to omit only Subject, although this does occur in restricted conditions. Instead of omitting only Subject, Subject and Finite are usually ellipped together (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). In contrast, Japanese does allow only the Subject to be ellipped. In an English

question, because of subject-auxiliary inversion, the Subject is not the first element in the clause, but is preceded by the Finite element. In contrast, there is no such phenomenon in Japanese. Given that what is really happening in the dialogues in both languages is ellipsis of the initial part of the clause, up to and including the Subject, in English this will capture the Finite element as well, while in Japanese this type of ellipsis only capture the Subject. This difference in grammatical constraints (that is, subject-auxiliary inversion in English) seems to have an effect on the occurrence of different types of ellipsis for the speech act of asking questions about instructions, that is, those which are associated with the [check], [align], [query-yn] and [query-w] moves. When the Giver and Follower are asking about the route, the English participants use Subject+Finite ellipsis, where the omitted Subject is *it* or *that*, whereas the Japanese participants use ellipsis in which only Subject is omitted, and the ellipted Subject is not clearly identifiable throughout the dialogue. Thus, it seems that syntactic aspects of language determine the prevalent type of ellipsis in each language; syntactic circumstances provide the background to the distribution of the prevalent type of ellipsis in both languages.

## 5 Conclusion

The analysis showed that it is true that the Subject is, as found in the Japanese dialogues, omitted in the English dialogues, but once it is omitted the element which deals with the finiteness of the verb is also omitted. The examination of the relation between form and function reinforces this observation; in elliptical clauses with one of the major speech acts in the map task dialogues, asking questions, Subject+Finite ellipsis is the most common type of ellipsis in the English dialogues while Subject ellipsis is most observed in the Japanese dialogues. The difference seems to be derived from the difference in grammar and pragmatics between the two languages: Subject-Finite inversion and what the missing Subjects refer to. Moreover, Subjects are omitted most in the Japanese instructions, while this is not the case with the English instructions. It seems that in the Japanese dialogues, Subject ellipsis can



contribute to reducing the command-like flavour of giving instructions as the agent of the action is not clearly verbalised. By having the agent missing, it is not indicated who gives the instruction to whom.

Ellipsis is widely observed in most languages and greatly contributes to the appropriateness of our communication. However, some linguists have pointed out that ellipsis is not well discussed yet in spite of its frequent use in languages. As noted by Crystal (1991), “‘(E)lliptical’ constructions are an essential feature of everyday conversation, but the rules governing their occurrence have received relatively little study” (p.120). This paper revealed an aspect of the use of ellipsis, i.e. the omission of the subject. However, there are other constituents to be investigated. In addition, future research could focus on ellipsis in various genres (e.g., everyday conversation).

#### Abbreviations Used in Glosses

ACC	accusative particle
COP	copula
FP	final particle
FPa	final particle for assertion (e.g., <i>yo, no</i> )
FPi	final particle for question (e.g., <i>ka, no</i> )
GEN	genitive particle
NMLS	nominaliser

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