

BLAH, BLAH, BLAH. ELLIPSIS VARIATION IN DISCOURSE

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"Blah-blah" ellipsis involves the use of a grammatical mechanism to permit the omission of a word or portions of a phrase due to a lack of necessity for overt expression or repetition. To interpret ellipsis requires the ability to analyze implicit information provided by the context of the utterance.

A common form of ellipsis in American English has gone as yet unrecognized: the reduplicative tag lines which manifest themselves in several variant forms such as "*blah, blah, blah*," "*yadda, yadda, yadda*," "*etc, etc*," "*da de da de da*," and most recently, "*blasé, blasé*." They are not found in complementary distribution, but more frequently the "*yadda-*," "*blah-*," and "*blasé-*" forms occur in negative-attitude utterances. I will refer to this kind of ellipsis as "blah-blah ellipsis," regardless of the actual form of the reduplicated word.

The uses of these forms of ellipsis do fall into 5 distinct evaluation-analysis environments. Unlike other forms, in blah-blah ellipsis the elided information has no referent in prior utterances in the discourse event; the comprehension of implied information is dependent upon the relationship of the participants of the speech event, and whether or not this omitted information has been previously established as "given" or shared, eliminating the need for further repetition in the current discourse. The motivation and strategy for use of these forms of ellipsis provide an insight into the speaker's evaluation of this discourse relationship: its introduction into a speech event indicates the speaker's judgment on the interlocutor's (or his/her own) competence as to the subject at hand. Based on this assessment which has taken place prior to or during the speech event, the speaker employs the abovementioned forms of ellipsis as a mechanism for concealing or bypassing information marked as unnecessary for overt expression. More important than the *reality* of the degree of communicative competence in either speaker or interlocutor is the *perceived* ability to follow the subject for discussion. Such issues as the degree of familiarity and/or shared experience between interlocutors play a part in which kinds of ellipsis are used.

There are at least five basic scenarios in which the "blah-blah" form of ellipsis is employed:

A) Assumed irrelevance to the listener

In this scenario, the speaker's assessment of the listener's interest in or relation to the subject has led the speaker to decide that detailed information should be left out, since further mention is believed to hold little importance for the interlocutor. This may include personal information valid only to the speaker,

which has no direct relevance to the listener, or there may be an assumption that the omitted information would not be helpful for further clarification due to the perceived remote nature of the subject. Examples include,

"I can do it after I go to the store, clean the house, blah, blah, blah "

This would be equivalent to the speaker's subtext, "I can join you after doing some of my own errands, which have nothing to do with you, so there's no point in detailing them for you." The types of actions mentioned in a sequence that ends in ellipsis presumably set up or refer to a category of action already situated in the listener's mind, conveying the type of activity involved without requiring further attention of the listener in order to comprehend the underlying message which, in this case, is that a delay must occur before the two parties can attend the function in question. In order for that "category" to be clearly established, a commonality of experience among the speakers must have already occurred.

The assessment of the speaker in this instance is twofold: 1) that the interlocutor is sufficiently familiar with the *general* category of action mentioned that explicit clarification is unnecessary, and 2) that the remainder of information contained in that category has no necessary relationship to the listener, which therefore permits its ellipsis in the utterance. Other examples of ellipsis in which the omitted material is deemed irrelevant to the hearer include

"Well, first I get out of bed, go brush my teeth, eat, dress, da de da de da, and then I'm off to work "

"Everybody was there, my parents, my grandparents, aunts, uncles, yadda, yadda, yadda, it was really crowded!"

"You know, first the speaker made the introduction, thanked the dean, then the board members, blasé, blasé "

Again, once a scenario is established by the speaker that leads the interlocutor to conjure up a familiar experience, the speaker is confident that the general setting or situation has been conveyed, and feels free to cease providing details. It is at this point that the ellipsis may take place, if it does not, and the speaker continues to provide irrelevant detail to the listener, the auditor may become impatient, or even encourage the speaker to "skip ahead."

B) A second use of *blah-blah* ellipsis occurs with the perception of an interlocutor's ignorance of the subject matter.

Under this motivation, closely related to scenario "A", it is not so much the speaker's evaluation that further explanation is unrelated and thus of little use, but that the listener is *not* sufficiently familiar with the subject to allow further

mention with any clarity An utterance of this type would be,

*"We collect the lunar samples from the probe, sort them, test them,
blah, blah, blah "*

The subtext in this case would imply, "The following details are outside of your field of knowledge, and my mention of these specific activities would go over your head, thus for the ease of conversation, I will spare you that and leave it out " In blah-blah ellipsis Type A, the motivation for omission includes the underlying assumption that the listener *would* most probably be familiar with the elements of the speech event that are left out, but in the speaker's estimation, explicit mention is unnecessary since those details are less related to the essential message at hand, further clarification might be perceived as needlessly repetitive or detailed However, blah-blah ellipsis Type B skips the material not because it is less related to the fundamental thought conveyed, but because further details cannot help the interlocutor since he/she is assumed to be unfamiliar with the additional ellided elements Under Type B, the speaker's evaluation would most likely deem those elements indeed "relevant," but the speaker chooses ellision since overt expression of these details would not serve as explanatory examples but would require yet further explanation themselves

This particular utilization of ellipsis is the most vulnerable to interpretation as an implied insult It is entirely possible that the speaker's evaluation was incorrect, and that the interlocutor realizes information was skipped due to the perception of his ignorance But for the most part, the omission of information is simply intended as an act of kindness to avoid boring or confusing the listener More examples of this type are,

"Grandma, the office I work in has the latest in technology, I have a fax machine, a modem, e-mail, etc , etc , I have everything I need to do the job quickly "

"We're going to be checking the fuel-injection, the transmission, radiator, da de da de da --the whole kit 'n' kaboodle to get you checked out before winter "

"You're too young to remember all those stars, but they were my favorites Sid Caesar, Jack Paar, Ed Sullivan, etc., etc. They were the greats "

In Type B scenarios, the speaker assumes herself/himself to be a kind of expert on the subject in comparison to the auditor, while additional examples or further explanation might not in fact be superfluous to the listener, the speaker does not intend to conduct the necessary "education" that would be required to familiarize the listener adequately, and simply avoids continued mention of details that are foreign to his/her audience

C) A third environment for blah-blah ellipsis occurs when a speaker wishes to fill the gaps of her/his own lack of information.

In this case, the speaker is actually *unable* to continue with detail, because the information is in fact unknown to him/her. The speaker uses ellipsis in this instance as a way of indicating that further information does indeed follow, though it is beyond what can be maintained with certainty by the speaker.

"I assume he said to come in under budget, ahead of schedule, yadda, yadda, yadda "

Like the other uses of ellipsis mentioned above, a sequence which is capped at the end by one of these elliptic forms begins with a "set-up" series which establishes the genre of expectation. But in this case, it is the *speaker* who cannot relate further specific information beyond the general categories, and trails off with the indicator that "similar information follows here I assume, which I cannot describe explicitly." Like Type B, Type C presents an environment for ellipsis based on an assessment of ignorance, but in this case it is the speaker him-/herself who "fails" the evaluation of competency, not the interlocutor. The environment remains the same, but the subject of the analysis shifts from audience to performer.

Other examples of Type C would be,

"Well, I guess I'll have to fill in an application, get the forms signed, pay the fee, blah, blah, blah, whatever they require, and then I'll be set "

"Yeah, dad took the main route, which I think goes through Oklahoma City, Dallas, Austin, da de da de da, all the way to Mexico "

"The sitter says he has all the main kid's videos Barney, Big Bird, Ninja Turtles, Lion King, yadda, yadda, yadda "

Blah-blah ellipsis can take place in all of these circumstances because the speech events in these cases are not of great enough importance to *require* that the missing information be provided. This is partly why the use of these tag lines have come to represent a casual or even indifferent attitude toward the matter being discussed. This kind of ellipsis usually does not occur in emergency, high pressure, or important speech events. One does not typically hear, "The left engine failed, we're losing oxygen, yadda, yadda, yadda" or "If you don't stop that right now, I'm going to spank you, send you to your room, etc., etc." While the "set-up" series may clearly indicate a sequence of predictable action, the comfort factor for leaving out shared information is absent in the cases in which clarity is absolutely vital. In those instances, the communication must be transmitted without ambiguity of any kind, which reduces the reliance on shared assumptions or bypassed technical details. Social ramifications of violating pragmatic rules in these types of discourse have a lower priority than being absolutely sure the interlocutor has understood.

fully An emergency medical technician would never radio the hospital with a message like, "We have a young Caucasian male, gunshot to the head, vital signs weak, blah, blah, blah "

D) Ellipsis functioning as a "Cut-to-the-chase" mechanism

Ellipsis is also used to bypass information for the sake of the speaker's impatience or that of the interlocutor. There is no assessment of expertise with the subject matter, but rather a desire to hurry past the "set-up" sequence in order to emphasize a later piece of information near the end of the utterance. Time constraints may be real or perceived, such as having to "hurry it up" because one member of the dyad must leave (i.e., for a meeting or to catch a bus) or because one would *like* to leave (since the information is lengthy, boring, repetitive, or otherwise not worthy of full expression). The set-up series is of less importance in this type of utterance, since it is the "chase" or "punchline" that is of interest.

"So there was a big fight, --blah, blah, blah-- and they broke up!"

"The letter said, 'we are pleased to inform you' --yadda, yadda, yadda-- and I got the job!"

"She just called and said all this stuff about how busy she is, with work, school, the kids, --blasé, blasé--but the bottom line is, she's backing out."

Type D motivations may actually follow those of the other types secondarily, (i.e. irrelevance, ignorance) but that criteria takes a lower priority than the desire to skip to "the good part." The ellided information is eliminated primarily because it is simply "in the way" and delaying the revelation of the truly "important" fact of the utterance.

The last major function for these forms of ellipsis is

E) as marker for familiarity and shared assumptions.

This form is common, its use is possible because both speaker and interlocutor are so *completely* familiar with the topic that the speaker can easily leave out portions of the utterance with the confidence that the listener is completely following along, filling in those gaps with information from that shared experience.

"We'll have our regular meal--turkey, dressing, etc, etc."

"You know how we do the sign of the cross, genuflect, da de da de da? Well this church had no kneelers, I was confused."

"He gave his same old excuses, that he 'forgot,' 'overslept,' blasé, blasé--you know, like he always does."

The use of ellipsis in this scenario has the effect of implied inclusion with the interlocutor, whose shared experience with the subject is assumed. Participants who use blah-blah ellipsis in this environment are often spouses, siblings, very close friends or coworkers whose range of common experiences is great. An example of this type aired recently during a popular American hospital-drama television show, in which a character stated, "*She can win the case if she gets a job, yadda, yadda, yadda* ". The doctor with whom she was speaking was already familiar with the details of her custody battle which was the topic of the conversation, this shared familiarity allowed a deletion of detail which might have otherwise followed. In Type E blah-blah ellipsis, since the speaker judges both speaker and auditor to be equal experts regarding the topic, a bypass is not only permissible but can be taken as a slight compliment, as in "since I know you know all about this, I feel confident that I can skip this part ". Again, as in situation "B", there is a risk for mis-evaluation, but any misunderstanding that occurs from this error is easily and quickly resolved, it is more likely to be perceived positively if one has over-assumed familiarity with a subject that to under-assume familiarity, as mentioned above.

Other semantic associations are attached specifically to "blah, blah, blah," "blasé, blasé," and "yadda, yadda, yadda ". While "etc , etc " and "da de da de da" do not seem to carry any negative judgments with their use, the 3 former examples often convey an attitude of disrespect or boredom with the subject mentioned. "Blah, blah, blah" and "yadda, yadda, yadda" are meant to be satirically onomatopoeic, as though to imitate the sound of speech which is boring or tiresome, it is a kind of judgment on perceived "babbling ". It has also come to take on a connotation of "bland" or "generic", as in the recent television commercial for a prominent brokerage firm which ridicules the service of a rival company by mentioning that it would like to have you invest in its "*blah-blah fund*," some unnamed generic investment plan, which is implied to be risky.

"Blasé, blasé" is a shifted word whose new meaning derives from its use as "nonchalant" or "bored" and has been transformed into one of the variations in ellipsis, indicating that the ellided information is entirely boring and without merit for repetition or clarification.

Please note the summary of types in Table 1 on the following page

Table 1
Environments for Blah-blah Ellipsis

<u>Speaker's evaluation</u>	<u>Speaker's use of ellipsis</u>
<i>Irrelevance</i> of ellided information	Type A
Example "I can do it after I go to the store, clean the house, <i>blah, blah, blah</i> "	
<i>Ignorance</i> of ellided information	Type B (interlocutor's)
Example "You're too young to remember all those stars, but they were my favorites Sid Caesar, Jack Paar, Ed Sullivan, etc, etc They were the greats "	
	Type C (speaker's)
Example "Yeah, dad took the main route, which I think goes through Oklahoma City, Dallas, Austin, <i>da de da de da</i> , all the way to Mexico "	
Ellision to emphasize later elements, " <i>cut-to-the-chase</i> "	Type D (catalyst for choice can be either participant)
"The letter said, 'we are pleased to inform you' -- <i>yadda, yadda, yadda</i> --and I got the job!"	
<i>Shared familiarity</i> with ellided information	Type E
"He gave his same old excuses, that he 'forgot,' 'overslept,' <i>blasé, blasé</i> --you know, like he always does "	

As we have seen, a speaker's assessment of irrelevance of details to his/her audience will result in their ellision in the speech event. I have called this blah-blah ellipsis of Type A. The underlying secondary assumptions may be that the listener *is* or *is not* adequately familiar with the details left out, but this factor takes less precedence than the more important factor (in this environment) of relevancy to the message.

When knowledge of, or familiarity with, more *specialized* information would be required for an interlocutor's full comprehension of a message, the speaker will choose ellipsis Type B if the assessment is that the auditor does not match her/his own expertise level. The information will be omitted when a speaker feels that inclusion of detail will not clarify but confuse the listener, and if the speaker is also not committed to providing that additional education during that discourse event.

However, if the speaker attempts to relate an episode that contains details with which the speaker is not suitably familiar, those details beyond the speaker's experience will be deleted and replaced with blah-blah ellipsis Type C. This type allows the speaker to skip over his or her own ignorance.

There is a secondary layer of intent which can operate in the use of blah-blah ellipsis, especially in Type C, in which the speaker makes an initial evaluation mentally, but chooses a different ellipsis type in practice, to project a different assessment to the audience. The speaker can admit ignorance in the use of ellipsis, for example, or can try to imply that the information was bypassed for a different reason, such as irrelevance.

An upper-level business executive, for example, could use ellipsis Type C to glide over the fact that she/he does *not* in fact know how to download information from the internet, when an entry-level rookie has asked the question, the executive may wish to "save face" and so attempts to imply that he/she has left detailed information out to "spare" the novice highly specialized terminology (ellipsis Type B), in fact the speaker's *own* ignorance may be the motivation for the ellision. This strategy for masked motivation is also often employed by parents as well, when confronted with difficult questions by their children. A "why-is-the-sky-blue" question may be answered with many "*etc -etc 's*" as an implication that the information is irrelevant or over the child's head, when in fact it may be that the parent truly has no idea and is unable to furnish a legitimate reply.

This aspect of ellipsis choice is one of the most interesting, since it implies a double-layer assessment. "I must leave out the following information for *X* reason, but I must make it appear that I have omitted it for *Y* reason, due to other social factors."

Ellision in Type D depends less on evaluations of competency than it does on the speaker's desire to communicate some salient feature, which takes place typically at the end of the utterance. The "cut-to-the-chase" bypasses information for the sake of time, not on the relation to the main message. As mentioned above, the demand for the "cut" can be expressed by either party, through body language or other paralinguistic factors. Excitement can play a part, when the speaker is so eager to reveal the "punch-line" to the story that details are sped over at first, with an option to relate them in their entirety *after* the main point has been delivered.

Type E places the greatest demands that information be held in common, it also requires the strongest assumptions. While people of close living or working proximity can develop these close relationships of shared experience, even to the point of "finishing each other's sentences" or "having ESP," it is also the ellipsis type which has the most potential for frustration in the event that the speaker makes an error in evaluation. It is not difficult to imagine the last time a close colleague or family member demanded the name of the "thing" when "we" went to "that place" "that time." Ellipsis Type E also provides frustration to "outside" participants of a speech event, who are trying to follow the discussion of an issue when a married couple or siblings employ a discourse of partial sentences and ellided fragments that leaves the outsiders confused and begging for clarification.

An innovative use of blah-blah ellipsis appeared in a Columbia, MO coupon book, on a coupon for a local pizzeria known for its sense of humor in advertising, the fine print at the bottom of the coupon read as follows:

Must present coupon. Special deals/offers/coupons cannot be combined. We reserve the right etc. etc. No cash value blah, blah, blah. This coupon expires eventually.

This example stands out because it humorously makes reference to several of the ellipsis types at once: the advertiser makes the assumption that the reader of the coupon is so completely familiar with the "fine-print" genre, that continued mention of those oft-repeated disclaimers is unnecessary (Type E). While it does not imply ignorance on the part of either advertiser or reader, the writer implies Type A irrelevance, as a kind of satire on these types of coupons, since the relation of legalities on a pizza coupon seems far removed from the average customer's desire to simply obtain a tasty lunch at a good price. There is also an implied reference to the reader's familiarity with a wish for a "cut-to-the-chase" on these kinds of coupons, the writer gives token lip service to those "required" statements, while hurrying to bypass the information and "get it over with." The casual, satirical humor conveyed by this ad copy would almost lead the reader to expect a final, "blasé, blasé" at the end!

There are actually other variant "allo-blahs" that appear in American English which function semantically and grammatically the same as the five primary forms listed here: do, some of these include "and so on, and so forth," "or whatever," "and stuff." Whatever its forms, blah-blah ellipsis provides a flexible and creative mechanism to shield, shape, veil, and share information between speakers. It becomes a subtle marker of a speaker's impressions about a speech contact and about his/her relationship to both the listener and the subject of discourse. What has been traditionally perceived as a "throwaway" line is actually the strongest communicative element in the interpretation of the pragmatic features of an utterance. Keen fluency in the applications of blah-blah ellipsis can aid in the comprehension of a speaker's metamessage and uncover deeper clues about the factors that combine to produce the communicative event.

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