

A Contrastive Study of Persian and English Written Discourse: Ellipsis in Realistic Novels

Esmail Faghih

Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran

Sepideh Rahimpour

Islamic Azad university Qouchan Branch

This study aspires to examine the concept of ellipsis by comparing and contrasting English and Persian written texts. For this purpose, three Persian novels and three English ones were selected. These novels were analyzed carefully; they were compared and contrasted for types and amount of ellipsis used, through a Chi-square analysis. The results of the data analysis revealed that various types of ellipsis were used differently in these two languages. In other words, in the English corpus, nominal ellipsis was used more frequently than verbal ellipsis but in the Persian one, the use of verbal ellipsis was more frequent than nominal. Moreover, the results of this study lend some support to the idea of the universality of ellipsis, in that, all subtypes of ellipsis were used in these two languages although they were used more frequently in English than in Persian. This study might have implications for teachers, material developers, and researchers in the field of teaching English as a foreign language. In other words, teaching ellipsis directly to foreign language learners will improve the quality of their writing. Moreover, the results of the present study have obvious importance in increasing students' awareness of the way native speakers of English organize their writing.

Keywords: Contrastive Analysis, Ellipsis, Substitution, Nominal/ Verbal/ Clausal Ellipsis

Theoretical and pedagogical implications are considered as constituting two main values of any contrastive study. The first value is concerned with the description of similarities and differences of any two languages and it supplies information to the general theories of linguistic descriptions. The latter reveals the different points of linguistic systems of any two languages, predicts the difficulties and provides a useful basis for the development of materials in the field of EFL/ESL programs (Fallahi, 1991). The contrastive analysis presented here is mainly concerned with pedagogical implications. It addresses a certain aspect of cohesion in English and Persian, selects components of the related structures, contrasts them, and thus hopefully will have pedagogical value in TEFL practices and specifically in revealing the sources of errors by Iranian students. As Firkins et al (2007) believe students have to create a text that "is both rhetorically and linguistically appropriate" (p. 341), but students usually have low proficiency at sentence level and they have minimal awareness at the level of complete texts.

Bloor et al (2007, p. 7) argue that "text is a product of discourse. It is normally used to describe a linguistic record of a communicative event." They refer to de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) and propose seven standards of textuality: cohesion, coherence, acceptability, intentionality, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality.

In spoken and written English discourses, accordingly, individual clauses and utterances are linked semantically by grammatical connections (McCarthy, 1991), which make a text cohesive. Cohesion, then, concerns "the way in which the linguistic items of which a text is composed are meaningfully connected to each other in a sequence on the basis of the grammatical rules of the language" (Malmkjær, 2004, p. 543), and formal devices signal the relationship between sentences. According to Malmkjær, in English, cohesion is built in four ways by: *reference*, *ellipsis* (including *substitution*), *conjunction* and *lexical organization*.

Ellipsis, among other cohesive devices, not only creates difficulties in learning the structural omissions which are

permissible, but also does not seem to be readily used even by proficient learners in situations where native speakers employ it (McCarty, 1991). Yet, despite the specific need for the foreign language learners to learn cohesive devices, it is the common experience, at least of EFL teachers, that most students fail to learn these devices adequately in the target language.

Malmkjær (2004) postulates that "ellipsis works anaphorically by leaving out something mentioned earlier, as in *Help yourself* (for instance, to some apples mentioned earlier)" (p. 543). Clark et al. (1977) also introduce ellipsis as one of the tools of reducing sentences. They further state that among different ways of reducing surface structures into very compact forms is the use of ellipsis. To clarify the meaning of ellipsis they point out "with ellipsis certain words can be omitted in the sentence" (p. 16). These words are used earlier in the text. Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 142) view ellipsis as "something unsaid", or in fact as "something understood" which means "going without saying". They note that ellipsis refers to a sentence, a clause, etc. whose structure can be presupposed from the preceding items. These items can serve as the missing information. It implies that ellipsis is considered as substitution by zero.

In comparing substitution with ellipsis, Halliday and Hasan (1976) argue that ellipsis is a special case of substitution. They state that the difference between substitution and ellipsis is that in the former a substitution counter appears in the slot, and if the presupposed item is replaced, then, there will be the omission of the substitution counter, whereas in the latter the slot is empty.

Thompson (1996) claims that substitution and ellipsis are so close that one can be taken for another. He defines ellipsis as "a set of resources by which full repetition of a clause or clause element can be avoided, and by which it can be signaled to readers that they should repeat the wording from a previous clause" (p. 148).

Halliday (1985) treats the two in one chapter and states that substitution and ellipsis can be various forms of the same type of cohesive relations.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) maintain that there are three types of ellipsis:

- a. Nominal ellipsis: Nominal ellipsis is considered as ellipsis within the nominal group.
- b. Verbal ellipsis: Verbal ellipsis is considered as ellipsis within the verbal group
- c. clausal ellipsis: with clausal ellipsis, individual clause elements may be omitted.

On the other hand, Thompson (1996) suggests that there are two kinds of ellipsis:

- a. Ellipsis proper
- b. Substitution

In ellipsis proper, "the element is simply missed out" (p. 148), as illustrated in the following example:

"How old is he? Two months." (p. 148).

Here, the reply presupposes the wording 'He is ...old'. So, in ellipsis proper "a gap is left to be filled by carrying over elements from a previous message" (p. 148).

Thompson (1996) clarifies the meaning of substitution as follows: "A substitution form marks the place where the earlier elements need to be brought in" (p. 152). He further mentions that a linguistic marker is placed where the repetition of the wording from elsewhere occurs. Thompson uses the example below to illustrate the definition:

"It's large for five months, but not abnormally so" (p. 148).
Here, *so* stands in the place of *large for five months*.

Hendriks (2004) describes ellipsis as one source of ambiguity in language, and explains that "the presence of ellipsis is one of the main reasons why natural language is as ambiguous as it is" (p. 133). Hendriks argues that the reason for the ambiguity of elliptical sentences is that there are various choices in order to recapture the components that have not been pronounced. However, he provides an example which shows that, in a number of cases, ellipsis decreases the number of readings a sentence might have. The example is as follows:

Sue became upset and Van became downright angry.
Sue became upset and Van Ø downright angry (p. 133).

On the other hand, James (1980) proposes that the effect of ellipsis is to create cohesion for the text. He refers to the paradoxical view of the elimination of part of the message and providing textual cohesion by suggesting that "one expects the opposite to happen and the speaker or reader to lose the thread" (p. 107). When the speaker/writer eliminates a segment of the speech/text, it reveals his/her willingness to accept the explicit contributions of the receiver as "given" and if s/he repeats it, it shows that the speaker/writer values it as taken for granted (Hardt & Romero, 2004).

In order to study the differences (if any) between the use of ellipsis in Persian and English, the following null hypotheses were posed:

1. There is no significant difference between the use of nominal ellipsis in written Persian and English.
2. There is no significant difference between the use of verbal ellipsis in written Persian and English.
3. There is no significant difference between the use of clausal ellipsis in written Persian and English.

Method

Since it was important that the texts analyzed in this study be comparable, an effort was made to select the novels which according to the knowledge of the researchers were on general topics and accordingly could be treated as being similar in some respects. That is, regarding the content it will not be far fetched to categorize the two novels as being 'realistic'. And, in regards to language, again it can be claimed that, the language used in both English and Persian corpus is the same as unmarked variety of language which are comprehensible for ordinary contemporary Persian and English readers. The English texts were taken from "A tale of two cities" by Charles Dickens, "Madame Bovary" by Gustave Flaubert, and "The Phantom of the Opera" by Gaston Leroux. For the Persian texts, "Sou va shoun" by Simin Daneshvar, "Kalidar" by Mahmoud Dolatabadi, and "Modir-e-madrese" by

Jalal Al-e-Ahmad were chosen. In order to make the corpus comparable, only one volume of "Kalidar" was analyzed.

In order to accomplish the purpose of the study which is identifying probable differences between the use of ellipsis in English and Persian corpus, the classification of ellipsis suggested by Halliday and Hasan (1979) was utilized.

To illustrate how the corpus was analyzed, some sample sentences, one from each subtypes of ellipsis in both languages, are provided below. It should be mentioned that, in the case of Persian examples, (a) is the transliterations, (b) is the literal translation, and (c) is the acceptable English equivalent of the sentence in question. The elliptical words or expressions are given in parentheses.

Sample Data

Nominal Ellipsis in Persian, taken from "Souvashoun":

- 1a. Mina væ Mærjan koja hæstænd?
- (*Mina væ Mærjan*) ræftæn tæmašaye Sækine. (p. 34)
- 1b. Mina and Marjan where are?
- (*Mina and Marjan*) Have gone to watch Sakine.
- 1c. - Where are Mina and Mærjan?
- They have gone to watch Sakine.
- 2a. emtehænet êetor šod?
- (*emtehænæm*) khoob šod. (p. 56)
- 2b. Exam yours how was?
- (*exam my*) good was.
- 2c. How was your exam?
- It was good.

Verbal Ellipsis in Persian, taken from "Modir-e-madrese" (p. 6):

- 1a. -chi gofti?
-hichi agha (*nagoftæm*).
- 1b. -What said you?
-Nothing (*said I*) sir.
- 1c. -What did you say?
- (*I said*) nothing sir.

Clausal Ellipsis in Persian, taken from "Kalidar":

- 1a. - mikhad kælækæmo bekæne, ha? (p. 840)
 - shayæd (*mikhad kælæketmo bekæne*)
- 1b. - Want he kill me, ya?
 - Maybe.
- 1c. - He wants to kill me, doesn't he?
 - Maybe (*he wants to kill you*).

Nominal Ellipsis in English, taken from "A Tale of Two Cities":

- 1. - She is not pretty. (p. 16)
 - But she is (*pretty*).
- 2. - Tonight. The others will meet me here. Where is the place?
 (p. 289)
 - (*The place*) (is) Along the road about five miles through the village.

Verbal Ellipsis in English, taken from: "The Phantom of the Opera"

- 1. "My door-keeper? I'll answer for him as I would (*answer*) for myself!"

Clausal Ellipsis in English taken from "Madame Bovary"

- 1. - " My daughter! – Emma! – My child! Tell me what happened!" (p. 326)
 – I don't know (*what happened to your daughter*).

To analyze the data obtained from the thorough study of the texts, Chi-square measure was applied. Chi-square analysis is usually applied when the data consists of frequencies. Consequently, in order to find out if there is any significant difference between the use of ellipsis in English and Persian data, Chi-square tests as appropriate nonparametric statistical tests were administered. The frequency and percentage of the use of ellipsis in the corpus are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1
Frequency and percent of the use of ellipsis in the Persian and English corpus

	Types of ellipsis	Frequency	Percent
Persian corpus	Nominal	150	22
	Verbal	190	27
	Clausal	345	51
English corpus	Nominal	755	31
	Verbal	805	33
	Clausal	850	36

Results and Discussion

To test the hypothesis that there is no difference between the use of different types of ellipsis in English and Persian corpus, a number of Chi-square tests were carried out. The first compared the use of nominal ellipsis in English and Persian corpus. The results of this Chi-square are summarized in Table 2:

Table 2
Results of Chi-square tests of nominal ellipsis in English and Persian

	Value	df	p
χ^2	23.020(a)	4	0.05

As the results show, the value of Chi-square was significant meaning that there is a significant difference between the use of nominal ellipsis in English and Persian. Thus, the first null hypothesis of the present study stating that "There is no significant

difference between nominal ellipsis in written English and Persian" was rejected.

The findings clearly indicate that nominal ellipsis was used in the English corpus more than the Persian one.

Another Chi-square was carried out, this time comparing the use of verbal ellipsis in these two languages. The summary of the results of this Chi-square is as follows:

Table 3

Results of Chi-square tests of use of verbal ellipsis in English and in Persian

	Value	df	p
χ^2	34.048(a)	4	.01

What these results indicate is that the value of Chi-square was significant meaning that there is a significant difference between the use of verbal ellipsis in English and Persian data. Thus, the second null hypothesis of the present study stating that "There is no significant difference between verbal ellipsis in written English and Persian" was rejected.

Also, it was found that in the English corpus, verbal ellipsis was used slightly more than the Persian one. Finally, another Chi-square was run to examine the probable difference between these two languages in the use of clausal ellipsis. The results of this Chi-square appear below:

This would confirm that the value of Chi-square was significant indicating that there is a significant difference between the use of clausal ellipsis in these two languages. Thus, the last null hypothesis of the present study stating that "There is no significant difference between nominal ellipsis in written English and Persian" was also rejected.

Table 4

Results of Chi-square tests of use of clausal ellipsis in English and in Persian

	Value	df	p
χ^2	49.720(a)	4	.00

Moreover, the results reveal that clausal ellipsis was used in the Persian corpus more than English. Thus, it can be generalized that ellipsis was used in the English data more than in the Persian one.

Conclusion and Implication

James (1980) claims that it is essential for contrastive analysis to identify constants and variables, and argues that "the formal devices differ from language to language" (p. 104). Since ellipsis is one of the subdivisions of these formal grammatical devices, in the present study the basic patterns and components of these patterns of ellipsis in English and Persian have been contrasted.

The analysis of the corpus of the study provides sufficient evidence to conclude that all subtypes of ellipsis under investigation occurred in the two languages. This finding can prove the universality nature of ellipsis. Generally speaking, clausal ellipsis was the most frequent devices in both English and Persian data. Comparing both languages, it was revealed that in the English corpus, nominal ellipsis was used more frequently than verbal ellipsis but in the Persian one, the use of verbal ellipsis was more than nominal. Also, all subtypes of ellipsis were used more frequently in English than in Persian.

The fact that syntactic mechanism of sentences is different in Persian and English ellipsis, in turn, results in the selection of the form of ellipsis in these two languages. It should be mentioned that the reason for the different uses of ellipsis in Persian and English refers to the respective cultures and the way of applying words and

their orders which is not the issue of this study. However, given the fact that ellipsis occurs both in English and Persian with some similarities, the danger of negative transfer from Persian to English for Iranian students somehow decreases.

The findings of this study proved that ellipsis is a frequent phenomenon in English and Persian. Therefore, EFL teachers can make their students conscious about this phenomenon. Also, they can make them aware of ellipsis as speakers' or writers' choice made on a pragmatic assessment of the situation. Moreover, material developers can use the findings of this study to make EFL learners familiar with ellipsis by highlighting the differences in their books. Finally, it is hoped that researchers and EFL teachers can employ the results of this study to improve the present situation of EFL learning by Iranian students.

It should also be mentioned that the finding of this study, will help novice writers benefit not just from process-oriented practices in producing texts but also from guided investigation of how texts work. Teachers can also provide sample texts for their students and ask them to count elliptical structures they find and discuss them in the class. It is even possible for the students to ask their teachers about their own writing practices. These feedback discussions are very useful to be utilized by the learners. This kind of analysis of the texts is a useful means for the teachers to help students control their writing practices.

The Authors

Esmail Faghih is Professor of English at Alzahra University of Tehran. He got his PhD in English Education (TESL/TEFL) from University of Illinois, USA. He has published numerous books and articles in the field of language teaching. He is also renowned for his translated books.

Sepideh Rahimpour got her MA degree in TEFL from Alzahra university. She is an academic member at Islamic Azad University, Qouchan branch. She has presented at different international conferences. Her area of interest is applied linguistics and discourse analysis.

References

- Al-e-Ahmad, J. (1337). *Modir-e-Madrese*. Tehran: Ravagh.
- Bloor, M. & Bloor T. (2007). *The Practice of critical discourse analysis*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Clark, H. H. & Clark, E. V. (1977). *Psychology and language*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovauovich.
- Daneshvar, S. (1348). *Sou va shoun*. Tehran: Kharazmi.
- Dolatabadi, M. (1357). *Kalidar*. Tehran: Farhang-e-moaser.
- Dickens, C. (1906). *A tale of two cities*. Boston: the Athenæum Press.
- Fallahi, M. (1991). *The grammatical structure of English and Persian*. Tehran: Iran University Press.
- Flaubert, G. (1981). *Madame Bovary*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Frinks, A., Forey, G. & Sengupta, S. (2007). Teaching writing to low proficiency EFL students. *ELT Journal*, 61(4), 341-352.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1985). *An introduction to functional grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halliday, M.A.K. & Hasan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.
- Hardt, D. & Romero, M. (2004). Ellipsis and the structure of discourse. *Journal of Semantics*, 21(4), 375-379.
- Hendriks, P. (2004). Coherence relations, ellipsis, and contrastive topics. *Journal of Semantics*, 21(2), 133-140.
- James, C. (1980). *Contrastive analysis*. London: Longman.
- Leroux, G. (1995). *The Phantom of the Opera*. London: Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- Malmkjær, K. (2004). *The linguistic encyclopedia*. London: Routledge.
- McCarthy, M. (1991). *Discourse analysis for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thompson, G. (1996). *Introducing functional grammar*. New York: Arnold Press.