

Was für-Split in Sluicing: Yet Another ‘Merchant’s Wrinkle’ Ironed Out

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1 Introduction: In German, the *wh*-phrase *was für* ‘what for’ can be split, as in (1b) (Pafel 1996). The split is, however, incompatible with sluicing (2b), which we generalize as (3). Our aim is to empirically demonstrate the validity of (3) and to provide a theoretical explanation.

(1) a. [Was für Bücher]₁ hast du t₁ gelesen? b. Was₁ hast du t₁ für Bücher gelesen?
what for books have you read what have you for books read
‘What (kind of) books did you read?’

(2) *Hans hat sonst was für Bücher gelesen, aber ich weiß nicht genau,*
Hans has else what for books read but I know not exactly

a. **no split** with & without sluicing: was für Bücher ([_{TP} er gelesen hat])
what for books he read has

b. **split** with & without sluicing: was *([_{TP} er für Bücher gelesen hat])
what he for books read has

‘Hans read various kinds of books, but I don’t know exactly what kind of books (he read).’

(3) *Was für-split* is impossible if the *für*-phrase is included in an ellipsis site.

2 Potential causes for the deviance: One conceivable reason for the unacceptability of sluicing in (2b) could be that the split occurs only in the ellipsis clause. In other words, the antecedent and the ellipsis clauses encompass non-parallel structures, which is known to be illicit in ellipsis under certain circumstances (as argued for by Rooth 1992). However, this is not what renders sluicing in (2b) unacceptable: in (4), the split also takes place in the antecedent clause, yet it is not permitted in sluicing (4b) – while the non-split (hence non-parallel) version in (4a) allows sluicing. Another potential explanation for the degradedness of sluicing that the *für*-phrase must be focused to be split, and hence, cannot be elided, can also be countered by (4b), since the same embedded clause appears twice. Thus, the second occurrence of the *für*-phrase cannot be focused, yet sluicing is not allowed in (4b).

(4) *Ich weiß mit was Hans für Aktien handelt, aber ich darf dir nicht sagen,*
I know with what Hans for stocks trades but I may you not say

a. **no split** with & without sluicing: mit was für Aktien ([_{TP} er handelt])
with what for stocks he trades

b. **split** with & without sluicing: mit was *([_{TP} er für Aktien handelt])
with what he for stocks trades

‘I know what stocks Hans trades, but I am not allowed to tell you what kind of stocks (he trades).’

To confirm (3), we must also consider the possibility that the elliptical construction that we have examined so far does not involve a structure isomorphic to the antecedent clause. Instead, what is elided might be a pronoun/demonstrative and a copula (see Merchant 2001). However, such an underlying cleft(-like) structure would also be unable to account for the unavailability of sluicing for two reasons. First, since a case connectivity effect is observed in the ellipsis construction in German (see Merchant 2001), we can demonstrate that a full clausal source is indeed available. For example, the dative case in (5) is incompatible with the copula construction (5a) and requires the full structure (5b). Second, even within such a copula-based second clause (5c), splitting is still possible (5d) in contrast to sluicing (2b,4b). Therefore, we need an analysis that explains the unavailability of sluicing as a consequence of the split itself, irrespective of the structural source.

(5) *Hans hat gestern irgendeinem Tier geholfen, aber ich weiß nicht,*
Hans has yesterday some.DAT animal helped but I know not

- a. *was für einem Tier* (**es/das war*) b. *was für einem Tier* (*er geholfen hat*)
 what for a.DAT animal it that was what for a.DAT animal he helped has
- c. *was für ein Tier* (*es/das war*) d. *was es für ein Tier war*
 what for a.NOM animal it that was what it for a.NOM animal was

‘Hans helped some animal yesterday, but I don’t know what kind of animal (it was / he helped).’

3 The syntax of was für-split: We are now in a position to explain (3). First, we adopt Abel’s (2012) proposal that the split is achieved by movement of the *für*-phrase out of the *wh*-phrase, which is followed by remnant movement of the *wh*-phrase, as depicted in (6) (see also Leu 2008). Evidence comes from the fact that *was* can pied-pipe a P without the *für*-phrase, as in (7a). Unless the *für*-phrase moves out of the PP, no constituent can be formed that exclusively contains the P *mit* and *was*, as in (7b).

(6) [CP [*was* t₁]₂ ... [TP ... [*für* NP]₁ ... t₂ ...]]

(7) a. *Mit was hast du denn für Leuten gerechnet?*
 with what have you PRT for people reckoned

‘What kind of people did you expect?’

(Abels 2012:252)

b. [[*für Leuten*]₁ ... [PP *mit* [*was* t₁]] ...]

We next capitalize on Müller’s (1998) generalization in (8) in order to reveal the type of movement that the *für*-phrase undergoes in splitting (see also Takano 1994). While the entire *was für*-phrase can be scrambled in (9a), *was* cannot undergo scrambling alone in (9b) (cf. Blümel 2012). The unacceptability of (9b) can be taken as evidence that the *für*-phrase moves out of the *wh*-phrase via scrambling in (6) and hence, the remnant, which comprises *was* and the trace, cannot undergo scrambling.

(8) Remnant-inducing movement and remnant movement cannot be of the same type.

(9) a. *Wer hat [was für ein Bier]₁ gern t₁ getrunken?*
 who has what for a beer gladly drunk

b. **Wer hat was₁ gern t₁ für ein Bier getrunken?*
 who has what gladly for a beer drunk

‘Who liked to drink what kind of beer?’

4 Explaining (3): Given this, (3) can be rephrased as (10). This can be accounted for by economy considerations. Scrambling is an optional operation and its word order changing effect must be represented in the PF representation (see Fox 2000). However, if a scrambled phrase lies within an ellipsis site, this requirement cannot be met, and scrambling is thus disallowed. Since scrambling of the *für*-phrase, a prerequisite step for *was für*-split, is not possible in sluicing, sluicing (2b) is unacceptable. One possible way to theoretically implement this idea is to postulate the condition that a phrase with a scrambling feature must not be c-commanded by a head involving Merchant’s (2001) E-feature.

(10) A scrambled phrase (i.e., the *für*-phrase) must not be included in an ellipsis site.

5 Conclusion: If an ellipsis site contains a full-fledged structure, what is possible in a non-elliptical context should also be possible in ellipsis. Kluck (2015) observes that the otherwise licit P-stranding becomes impossible in sluicing in Dutch and calls it ‘Merchant’s wrinkle.’ (3) can be taken as another such ‘Merchant’s wrinkle.’ However, using the analysis above, we managed to iron this one out (see Griffiths et al. 2021 for a related analysis of Kluck’s ‘Merchant’s wrinkle’).

Selected References:

- Griffiths, James et al. 2021. Dutch preposition stranding and ellipsis: ‘Merchant’s Wrinkle’ ironed out. *The Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics* 24(3). 269–318.
- Leu, Thomas. 2008. A Note on *what for* Split. In Levinson, Lisa & Savescu-Ciucivara, Oana (eds.), *NYU Working Papers in Linguistics 1*. New York University: Department of Linguistics.
- Merchant, Jason. 2001. *The Syntax of Silence: Sluicing, Islands, and the Theory of Ellipsis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.