

تحليل نحوي للبنية الدنيا في شعر بيكيت المتأخر

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A Syntactic Analysis of Minimal Structure in Beckett's Late Poetry

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Abstract

This study explores the syntax of minimal structure in three late English poems by Samuel Beckett: 'what is the word' (1989), 'Roundelay' (1976) and 'something there' (1974), as published in the definitive Collected Poems (Beckett, 2012). Using the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995, 2001), ellipsis theory (Merchant, 2001, 2004) and the Question Under Discussion framework (Roberts, 1996; Büring, 2003), the paper suggests that Beckett's extreme simplification is not a rejection of grammatical computation, but a harnessing of its most efficient procedures. The study finds three major syntactic phenomena involved: (i) antecedent-less ellipsis (ALE), in which PF-deletion is licensed by an E-feature but the identity condition is satisfied by an informationally deficient QUD-antecedent; (ii) deficient functional projection, where substitution by the lexicon is precluded by the failure to reach minimum functional projections (TP and CP) in the syntax; and (iii) argument structure



deficiency (ASD), where arguments' existential content is discharged by their theta-roles but their descriptive content is not, leaving the truth of the proposition with existential content but null discriminatory force. The paper also identifies two types of structures: (i) hypergrammatical structures, which are licensed at PF by fulfilling all formal licensing conditions but are under-determined at LF; and (ii) a minority of conceded ungrammatical structures, which violate strict bare phrase structure conditions. The co-presence of both types within the same work formalises Beckett's aesthetic of almost nothing. The results bear on the licensing of ellipsis, the notion of economy in the Minimalist program, and the empirical properties of poetic grammar.

ملخص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة بنية الجملة البسيطة في ثلاث قصائد إنجليزية متأخرة للشاعر صموئيل بيكيت: «ما هي الكلمة» (١٩٨٩)، و«التأخير» (١٩٧٦)، و«شيء ما هناك» (١٩٧٤)، كما نُشرت في المجموعة الكاملة لقصائده (بيكيت، ٢٠١٢). وباستخدام البرنامج التبسيطي (تشومسكي، ١٩٩٥، ٢٠٠١)، ونظرية الحذف (ميرشانت، ٢٠٠١، ٢٠٠٤)، وإطار السؤال قيد النقاش (روبرتس، ١٩٩٦؛ بورينغ، ٢٠٠٣)، تشير الورقة إلى أن تبسيط بيكيت الشديد ليس رفضاً للحساب النحوي، بل هو تسخير لأكثر إجراءاته فعالية. تُشير الدراسة إلى ثلاث ظواهر نحوية رئيسية: (أ) الحذف بدون سابقة (ALE)، حيث يُجيز حذف PF بواسطة سمة E، لكن شرط التطابق يتحقق بواسطة سابقة QUD ناقصة المعلومات؛ (ب) الإسقاط الوظيفي الناقص، حيث يُمنع الاستبدال بالمعجم بسبب عدم بلوغ الحد الأدنى من الإسقاطات الوظيفية (TP) و (CP) في النحو؛ (ج) نقص بنية الحجة (ASD)، حيث يُفرغ المحتوى الوجودي للحجج بواسطة أدوارها ثباتاً، لكن محتواها الوصفي لا يُفرغ، مما يجعل صدق القضية ذا محتوى وجودي لكن بلا قوة تمييزية. كما تُحدد الورقة نوعين من البنى: (أ) البنى فائقة القواعد، التي تُجيز عند PF باستيفاء جميع شروط الترخيص الرسمية، لكنها غير محددة بشكل كافٍ عند LF؛ (ب) أقلية من البنى غير النحوية المُسلم بها، والتي تُخالف شروط بنية العبارة المجردة الصارمة. إنّ وجود كلا النوعين معاً في العمل نفسه يُضفي طابعاً رسمياً على جمالية بيكيت القائمة على شبه انعدام المحتوى. وتؤثر هذه النتائج على ترخيص الحذف، ومفهوم الاقتصاد في البرنامج التبسيطي، والخصائص التجريبية لقواعد الشعر.



1. Introduction

Samuel Beckett's late poems present a grammar at minimum. Written for the most part in the last two decades of the author's life, these poems do not simply strip down language: they explore the grammatical Point Zero, yielding utterances comprised of single words, bare nominals, truncated infinitival structures, verbless clauses, and interrogative fragments in which prediction is delayed or denied. Beckett's own lines - "ever tried. ever failed. no matter. try again. fail again. fail better" (Beckett, 1983, p. 7) - epitomise the literary syntax of the late poems: the series, grammatically incomplete, but organised by a reiteration and an elaboration that belies the persistence, if not the suppressions, of the sentence-forming potential.

Despite the wealth of this material for formal linguistic study, the focus of work on Beckett's language has been more literary-critical and philosophical (Connor, 1988; Ackerley and Gontarski, 2004). When linguistic analysis has been applied, it has often focused on pragmatics, stylistics or discourse analysis (Brater, 1994; Locatelli, 1990), but little has been made of the syntactic basis of these late poems using formal generative methods. This paper seeks to redress this by bringing to bear the synergy of three complementary approaches - the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995, 2000, 2001), the formal theory of ellipsis (Merchant, 2001, 2004; Van Craenenbroeck and Temmerman, 2019), and the Question Under Discussion (QUD) framework (Roberts, 1996; Büring, 2003) - on three late poems: 'what is the word' (1989), 'Roundelay' (1976), and 'something there' (1974), all quoted from Beckett (2012).

The central claim of this paper is that Beckett's syntactic minimalism is grammatically principled. The Minimalist Program (MP) holds that syntactic computation is governed by economy conditions: derivations are generated with the minimum number of operations, and only material satisfying interpretive conditions at the Phonological Form (PF) and Logical Form (LF) interfaces is retained (Chomsky, 1995, pp. 220–260). Ellipsis theory (Merchant, 2001) provides a formal mechanism for the suppression of phonological material: a functional head bearing an E-feature licenses PF-deletion of its complement. The QUD framework (Roberts, 1996) provides the discourse-semantic basis for identifying the antecedent against which deleted material is interpreted. Together, these frameworks permit a precise structural question to be asked of each of Beckett's fragments: what has been deleted, where was the deletion licensed, and what discourse antecedent, if any, enables LF-recovery?



The analysis demonstrates that Beckett's late poems produce three distinct structural configurations: ALE (in which PF-deletion is licensed against an informationally empty QUD-antecedent), deficient functional projection (in which derivations terminate below the TP/CP functional domain), and ASD (in which theta-roles are discharged without generating descriptive content). The paper also further clarifies its own main thesis by differentiating the hypergrammatical structures (those which are well-formed formally at PF but poor in semantics at LF) from a handful of ungrammatical structures, and claims that the co-existence of the two is significant in its own right. Section 2 provides background on the relevant literature and approaches. Section 3 describes the methodology. Section 4 presents the analysis. Section 5 explores the theoretical and empirical consequences. Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Linguistic Approaches to Beckett's Language

Scholarship on Beckett's language falls into two camps. The default mode is literary-critical and philosophical: Beckett's linguistic reduction has been interpreted as an expression of existential failure, an assault on representational language, or as a theatrical technique to emphasise the communicative limitations of language (Connor, 1988; Knowlson, 1996). Knowlson's (1996) authoritative biography situates the late poems within a career-long artistic trajectory towards what Beckett called 'impoverishment' a progressive stripping of vocabulary, syntax, and figuration. Ackerley and Gontarski (2004) provide the most comprehensive reference guide to Beckett's works, but their approach is primarily explicatory rather than formally linguistic.

A second tradition has engaged Beckett's language through linguistic categories, though rarely through formal generative syntax. Locatelli (1990) analyses Beckett's prose style through illocutionary theory and Gricean pragmatics. Brater (1994) examines the relationship between dramatic text and stage language in the late works with attention to deixis and referential failure. Neither tradition brings the formal tools of generative syntax to bear on the poetry, and a systematic analysis of the late poems' phrase structure, ellipsis configurations, and argument architecture remains absent from the literature.

The application of generative frameworks to poetic language more broadly remains limited. Work at the linguistics–poetics interface has tended to favour pragmatics and cognitive linguistics (Pilkington, 2000) or stylistics (Levin, 1962). Jakobson's (1960, p. 358) foundational claim that the 'poetic function' projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection onto the axis of combination provides the theoretical





grounding for treating poetics as a branch of linguistics, implying that poetry does not escape grammatical structure but foregrounds and exploits it. This paper operationalises that implication through formal generative analysis.

2.2 The Minimalist Program

The Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995, 2001) proposes that the syntactic faculty operates through a small set of computationally simple operations satisfying conditions imposed by the PF and LF interfaces. The operation is Merge: Merge of two syntactic objects α and β yields the set $\{\alpha, \{\alpha, \beta\}\}$, with α the head and projection (Chomsky, 1995, pp. 243–250). Merge can be External (joining two objects from the numeration) or Internal (moving one object in the structure).

Two principles of Minimalist Program (or MP) are crucial for the current analysis. First, the condition of Full Interpretation (FI) states that all features in the LF are interpretable: if there are uninterpretable features, they must be checked and removed from the representation before Spell-Out (Chomsky, 1995, pp. 230–240). Failure of checking leads to crash of the derivation; absence of uninterpretable features results in minimal structure. Second, **bare phrase structure** (Chomsky, 1995, pp. 240–249) entails that phrase structure emerges from Merge itself: if no functional head is present in the numeration, no functional projection is generated, and the derivation converges with lexical-level structure only. Chomsky's (2001) **phase theory** adds that derivations proceed cyclically through phases (vP and CP), and ellipsis can be modelled as the non-pronunciation of a phase complement at PF when an E-feature is present on the phase head (Merchant, 2001, pp. 40–70). Radford (2004) provides the notational conventions used in the analysis below.

2.3 Ellipsis Theory

Ellipsis is the family of constructions in which syntactic structure present in the derivation is suppressed at PF, leaving a gap that must be recovered from an antecedent. Merchant (2001) argues that ellipsis is licensed by a formal feature, the **E-feature**, on a functional head, which instructs the PF-component to delete the complement of that head. The licensing of ellipsis requires two conditions (Merchant, 2001, pp. 25–82). The first is a formal licensing condition: a head bearing the E-feature must be present. The second is an identity condition, the *e-GIVENNESS condition*: the elided material E must be contextually salient, must be entailed by the antecedent A, and must entail A under a contextually



determined assignment. For **fragment answers** (Merchant, 2004), a sub-clausal constituent undergoes A-bar movement to [Spec, FP] with the residual TP deleted under E. For **sluicing** (Chung, Ladusaw and McCloskey, 1995), an entire TP is deleted in a wh-interrogative. For **VP ellipsis** (Johnson, 2001), VP is deleted under T bearing E. Lobeck (1995) proposes that the licensing head must be 'strong', capable of identifying the elided category through its own formal features. Van Craenenbroeck and Temmerman (2019) provide a comprehensive survey of the contemporary state of the field, including recent debates on the identity condition (Griffiths and Lipták, 2014) that bear directly on the ALE analysis developed below.

2.4 The Question Under Discussion Framework

Roberts' (1996) Question Under Discussion (QUD) framework proposes that discourse is structured by a stack of questions: every assertion is interpreted as a partial or complete answer to the most salient question in the discourse context, whether that question is explicit or implicit. Büring (2003) extends this framework to account for focus and information structure, demonstrating that the QUD constrains interpretation at the pragmatics–semantics interface. For ellipsis theory, the QUD framework provides a mechanism for specifying the discourse antecedent against which elided material is identified: rather than requiring an overt sentential antecedent, QUD-based accounts permit the antecedent to be supplied by the discursial question to which an utterance responds. Griffiths and Lipták (2014) use a QUD-based identity condition to account for clausal ellipsis in circumstances where the usual e-GIVENness condition seems too tight: they show that ellipsis can be licensed when the material being elided is available from the current QUD, not an explicit antecedent clause. This is the theoretical lever exploited in the present paper's analysis of ALE: Beckett's poems establish a QUD through their repeated interrogative refrains, and fragments are licensed against this QUD, with the crucial difference that the QUD itself is informationally empty, producing an antecedent that licenses the formal operation of deletion without enabling successful LF-recovery.

2.5 Non-Sentential Constituents

An alternative to the ellipsis analysis of sub-clausal utterances is provided by Barton (1990) and Stainton (2006), who argue that non-sentential constituents (NSCs) are not derived from full sentences by ellipsis but are





themselves well-formed grammatical objects generated as bare phrases. On this view, 'folly' uttered in isolation is simply [NP *folly*], a nominal phrase pragmatically interpreted as a complete speech act without any syntactic deletion. The NSC analysis has the advantage of avoiding any appeal to ellipsis licensing; however, as Section 5.1 argues, it cannot account for the internal clausal structure of Beckett's complex fragments, the categorial properties of their remnants, or the systematic distribution of deletion sites across the three poems. A uniform account of ellipsis is preferred for reasons of simplicity.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Corpus

The data are three late English poems by Beckett from Beckett (2012). The poems were selected on three criteria: (i) **chronological scope**: they span 1974–1989, covering the final fifteen years of Beckett's active composition; (ii) **syntactic diversity**: each poem foregrounds a distinct syntactic phenomenon, enabling thematically grouped analysis; and (iii) **Anglophone composition**: all three were composed originally in English, avoiding translation-induced syntactic variability. The three poems and their primary syntactic phenomena are: 'something there' (1974), minimal predication and argument structure deficiency; 'Roundelay' (1976), verbless clause structure and deficient functional projection; 'what is the word' (1989), fragment ellipsis, antecedent-less deletion, and incremental Merge.

3.2 Analytical Procedure

The analysis follows a three-stage procedure. **Stage 1 Constituent categorisation**: each utterance unit is assigned a phrase-structural category under bare phrase structure (Chomsky, 1995), represented using labeled bracket notation following Radford (2004). Categories used: NP, VP, PP, TP, CP, AdvP, SC (small clause, following Stowell, 1983), and FP (focus phrase, following Merchant, 2004). **Stage 2 Ellipsis identification**: each sub-sentential unit is examined for ellipsis following Merchant (2001) and the QUD conditions of Roberts (1996). Ellipsis is identified where (a) a phonological gap is present; (b) the elided material is reconstructable at LF; and (c) a licensing head bearing an E-feature can plausibly be posited. Where the antecedent is supplied by an informationally empty QUD, the structure is identified as antecedent-less ellipsis (ALE) and marked (χ ANT^{nRL}). **Stage 3 Feature and theta-role analysis**: uninterpretable features and thematic role assignments are assessed. Where theta-roles are discharged onto arguments that are

existentially contentful but descriptively inert, the configuration is analysed as argument structure deficiency (ASD).

3.3 Notational Conventions

Labeled bracket notation: [XP [X' [X head] [YP complement]]]. Ellipsis site: Δ . E-feature on functional heads: [E]. Antecedent unavailability (standard): (\times ANT). QUD-antecedent (informationally empty): (\times ANT^{nRL}). Phonologically null heads: \emptyset . Unanchored null argument: UNA. Theta-role subscripts: θ (Theme θ , Locative θ , Agent θ). Co-indexation chains: subscript *i*. Argument structure deficiency: ASD. Antecedent-less ellipsis: ALE. QUD: Question Under Discussion.

3.4 Treatment of Line Boundaries

The present analysis assumes that each line of the poem constitutes an independent syntactic unit. This decision is not self-evident, because it is not a built-in consequence of Selkirk's (1984) syntax-prosody model, which does not stipulate that line breaks are coextensive with syntactic boundaries. Three independent grounds support this treatment for the present corpus.

First, Beckett's consistent use of dashes at line-ends throughout 'what is the word' functions as a conventional marker of syntactic truncation: the dash signals that a constituent is incomplete, not that it continues on the following line. This is confirmed by the progressive expansion of fragments across lines (Section 4.1): each line does not continue the prior syntactic object but adds a new object to a sequence. Second, each line in all three poems corresponds to an independent intonational unit: it can be assigned a single intonation phrase (Selkirk, 1984) without requiring prosodic material from adjacent lines. Third, the categorical and structural analyses proposed below are consistent with this line-as-utterance treatment: every line receives a complete and self-contained phrase-structural analysis. The analyses would become significantly more complex, and less explanatory, if lines were required to be parsed as parts of larger cross-line units. This does not preclude the existence of discourse-level relations between lines; it simply maintains that the primary syntactic unit of analysis in these poems is the individual line.

3.5 Scope and Limitations

The analysis is restricted to syntactic structure. Full phonological and semantic analyses fall outside its scope. The paper makes no claims about





Beckett's poetic intentions or philosophical positions; such claims require a different disciplinary apparatus.

4. Analysis

4.1 'what is the word' (1989): Antecedent-less Ellipsis and Incremental Merge

Beckett's final composition was written in 1989 following a period of illness. Composed simultaneously in French ('comment dire') and English, it consists almost entirely of sub-clausal fragments separated by dashes functioning as prosodic and syntactic break markers. The poem is cited from Beckett (2012). The opening lines establish its syntactic idiom:

folly —
folly for to —
what is the word —

(Beckett, 2012, ll. 1–3)

The first line presents 'folly' as a single nominal in isolation. Under bare phrase structure (Chomsky, 1995), this projects a minimal NP:

(1) [NP [N folly]]

Following Merchant's (2004) fragment analysis, this NP has moved to a focus-peripheral position [Spec, FP], with the residual clause deleted under the E-feature. However, the critical question is what licences this deletion and how the identity condition is met. Under standard fragment analysis, deletion requires a recoverable antecedent TP (Merchant, 2001, pp. 25–82). At line 1, no such antecedent exists. The poem's formal solution, as it becomes clear from line 3, is to establish a global Question Under Discussion (Roberts, 1996): the repeated interrogative 'what is the word' functions as a QUD that dominates the entire discourse structure of the poem:

(2) QUD: "What is the word [for Δ]?"

Under the QUD-based ellipsis licensing account (Griffiths and Lipták, 2014), fragment licensing requires not a prior sentential antecedent but a salient discourse question relative to which the fragment constitutes a potential answer. The nominal 'folly' functions as a potential constituent answer to this QUD: it supplies a candidate word for the missing predicate. The fragment licensing structure is therefore:

(3) [FP [NP folly]_i [F' [F [E]] [TP ... Δ_i ... (X ANT^{nRL})]]]

The (X ANT^{nRL}) notation marks that the antecedent is supplied by the QUD rather than by an overt prior clause. Crucially, the QUD itself contains an unspecified gap (Δ): the question asks what word would

complete the structure, but the word sought is precisely unavailable. The E-feature is licensed (condition i is met), movement to [Spec, FP] has occurred (condition ii is met), but the identity condition (condition iii) can only be satisfied against a QUD-antecedent that is itself informationally empty. This is the formal mechanism of **ALE**: deletion licensed by an E-feature against a QUD-antecedent that provides formal but not informational satisfaction of the identity condition. The derivation converges at PF but produces an under-determined LF. This is not a vacuous satisfaction of the identity condition; it is satisfaction against an antecedent whose informational content is null.

Line 2, 'folly for to —', expands the fragment through an archaic infinitival structure. 'For' functions as a prepositional complementiser selecting a non-finite TP headed by 'to', whose VP complement is elided:

- (4) [FP [NP folly]_i [F' [F [E]] [TP ... [PP for [TP to [VP ... Δ (X ANT^{nRL})]]]] ...]]]

VP ellipsis applies at the embedded infinitival VP: T[–finite] bears the E-feature and licenses deletion of VP against the same QUD. Line 3 is the first fully projected clause in the poem:

- (5) [CP [C what]_i [TP [T is] [DP the word]]] ← full interrogative clause

This direct interrogative is structurally complete. Its discourse function is dual: it constitutes the poem's only fully realised clause, and it simultaneously *establishes* the QUD against which all other fragments are licensed. The interrogative does not seek information in a standard conversational sense; it institutes the formal discourse structure that licenses the surrounding ALE fragments while acknowledging that the information sought is unavailable. The structure of the poem is thus self-reflexive at the level of the licensing of ellipsis: the one complete clause in the text is the clause that establishes the QUD under which the ellipses are interpreted.

The poem then develops through a series of incremental Merge operations:

- folly from this —*
all this —
folly from all this —
given —
folly given all this —
seeing —
folly seeing all this —



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(Beckett, 2012, ll. 4–10)

Each step represents External Merge of a new modifier onto the NP 'folly':

(6a) [NP [NP folly] [PP from [NP this]]] step 1:
PP-adjunct

(6b) [NP [NP folly] [PP from [NP all this]]] step 2:
quantified PP

(6c) [NP [NP folly] [PP [P given] [NP all this]]] step 3:
participial PP

(6d) [NP [NP folly] [VP seeing [NP all this]]] step 4:
participial VP-adjunct

Each line involves a single Merge operation to the previous structure - Minimal Merge, External Merge. We produce a right-branching structure that grows outwards but is stuck at the NP stage, since no functional head (T, C, D) is merged at any point. The entire derivation is within the lexical domain, producing the minimal derivation allowed under the MP: no movement, no feature-checking, no functional projections, only External Merge. The NP's predication - a copula, a tensed T - fails to materialise. 'Folly' gets modifiers but doesn't get a predicate: it gets close to being a proposition but never is.

The poem's final section introduces the most structurally complex fragment:

*afaint afar away over there what —
folly for to need to seem to glimpse afaint afar away over
there what —
what —
what is the word —*

(Beckett, 2012, ll. 33–36)

'Afaint afar away over there' is a sequence of adverbs and locative PPs:

(7) [AdvP afaint] [AdvP afar] [AdvP away] [PP over
[AdvP there]]

This configuration requires special theoretical treatment. Unlike the ALE fragments and bare NPs analysed elsewhere in the paper which are **hypergrammatical**: formally well-formed at PF while semantically impoverished at LF, example (7) is a genuinely **ungrammatical** structure. No single projection dominates the sequence in well-formed bare phrase structure (Chomsky, 1995, pp. 240–249), which requires every merged object to have a projecting head. This is headless adjunct



stacking: a configuration without a projecting host head, which bare phrase structure does not generate. The paper's central thesis that Beckett's syntax is hypergrammatical must therefore be qualified: the predominant mode is hypergrammaticality, but at the poem's climactic penultimate sequence, the syntax crosses into genuine ungrammaticality. This crossing is analytically significant rather than incidental: the poem approaches the grammatical limit from the inside (hypergrammaticality: economy exploited to its maximum) and at one precise moment overshoots it (ungrammaticality: bare phrase structure violated), before the final line, 'what is the word' (example 5), returns to the poem's only complete and fully grammatical clause. The oscillation between hypergrammatical, ungrammatical, and grammatical structure in the poem's final four lines enacts its near-nothing thesis at the derivational level.

The immediately following line represents the maximum extent of Merge:

- (8) [FP [NP folly] [F' [F [E]] [TP ...[PP for [TP to [VP
need
[TP to [VP seem [TP to [VP glimpse [NP Δ
(X ANT^{nRL})]]]]]]]...]]]

The VP chain 'need to seem to glimpse' is a raising-to-subject structure with three successive raising predicates. The verb 'glimpse' requires an internal argument (NP Theme); this position is elided under ALE, licensed against the poem's global QUD:

- (9) [VP [V glimpse] [NP Δ (X ANT^{nRL})]] + [AdvP afaint
afar away] + [PP over there] + [NP what]

The Theme θ role of 'glimpse' is discharged onto a null element licensed by the QUD but informationally empty. This is ASD embedded within ALE: argument structure is formally satisfied (preventing a theta-criterion crash) while generating no recoverable propositional content. The derivation is as close to nothing as syntax can produce while remaining syntactic.

4.2 'Roundelay' (1976): Verbless Clauses and Deficient Functional Projection

'Roundelay' (Beckett, 2012) is a thirteen-line poem whose circular structure enacts at the discourse level the syntactic repetition that characterises each individual line. No line contains a main verb or copula: all thirteen lines are verbless, generating a text in which predication is structurally possible but functionally suppressed. The opening lines:



*on all that strand
at end of day
steps sole sound*

(Beckett, 2012, ll. 1–3)

Lines 1 and 2 are bare prepositional phrases, locative and temporal adjuncts respectively:

(10) [PP on [NP all [N' that strand]]]

(11) [PP at [NP end [PP of [NP day]]]]

These are simple PP projections without a clause to modify; under ALE they are licensed against the implicit QUD of the poem (\times ANT^{nRL}). The line 3, 'steps sole sound', is more complicated. Two analyses are available.

The first is a small clause analysis (Stowell, 1983): 'steps' is the subject of the small clause and 'sole sound' is the predicate of the small clause:

(12a) [SC [NP steps] [NP sole sound]] (small clause, Stowell 1983)

The small clause analysis is parsimonious, and brings out the predication relation. But it is problematic because ordinary small clauses are complements of selecting verbs (e.g., 'I found [SC him guilty]') and are licensed by selecting verbs. In 'steps sole sound', there is no selecting verb and the would-be small clause is unlicensed. The result is a well-formed internal structure, but a "hanging" constituent.

The second analysis, preferred here, posits a **deficient TP** in which T is phonologically null:

(12b) [TP [NP steps] [T' [T \emptyset] [VP [V \emptyset] [NP sole sound]]]] (deficient TP)

The deficient TP analysis is to be preferred for two reasons. First, it allows the formation of the predication relation in the TP domain without a licensing verb. Second, and more significantly, it offers a uniform analysis of the thirteen lines of the poem with no verb: Each line, regardless of its internal structure, ends in a zero T at or below the TP level. This is preferable to the small clause analysis, which would require a different licensing verb for each line. Zero-copula constructions are found cross-linguistically, including in other dialects of English such as African-American Vernacular English (Labov, 1969), but in the case of 'Roundelay' the zero copula is not a sociolinguistic variable but a uniform and total poetic choice.

The middle section of the poem introduces another key structure:

until unbidden stay



*then no sound
on all that strand
long no sound
until unbidden go*

(Beckett, 2012, ll. 5–9)

Until unbidden stay' (l. 5) is a subordinate clause with 'until' as complementiser and 'stay' as bare infinitive. A null subject must occupy the subject position to discharge the Agent θ role of 'stay'. The theoretical status of this null subject requires careful specification.

In Government and Binding theory (Chomsky, 1981), PRO is licensed in non-finite contexts where no case-assigning T is present; *pro* is licensed in finite contexts by a strong agreement head bearing overt phi-features (Rizzi, 1986). In the Minimalist Program, Landau (2004) analyses PRO as bearing a defective T-feature, licensed by Agree with a control predicate. In Beckett's deficient TPs, where T is phonologically null and bears no overt phi-features or case features, neither the standard licensing conditions for PRO (control by a matrix argument) nor those for *pro* (agreement with a strong T) are met. The null subject in (13) is therefore analysed as an **unanchored null argument** (UNA): an element present in the derivation to satisfy the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) and to receive a theta-role from the predicate, but formally unlicensed by either agreement or control in the standard sense. UNAs are a direct consequence of deficient functional projection: when T is null, neither agreement-based nor control-based null subject licensing is available.

(13) [CP until [TP [NP UNA] [T' [T \emptyset] [VP [V stay]]]]]

The adjective 'unbidden' modifies UNA, the unnamed entity stays without being commanded to, but without an antecedent or agreement host, UNA has no referential content, and 'unbidden' is a modification of a referentially empty element. This is another example of ASD: the Agent θ of the verb 'stay' is filled by UNA, thereby formally fulfilling the Theta Criterion, but creating no referential content.

'Then no sound' (l. 6) is a temporal adverb followed by a predicate NP, again without copula:

(14) [AdvP then] [NP no sound]

(15) [TP [NP UNA] [T' [T \emptyset] [VP [V' [V be(\emptyset)] [NP no sound]]]]]

The copula is *una* and the subject is *una*. ASD applies: the Theme θ role of the existential predicate discharges onto UNA, fulfilling the Theta





Criterion but not contributing a referential content. The circularity of the poem is realised grammatically: the same phrase-structure types - bare PP, deficient TP (null T, UNA subject), and subordinate clause (UNA) - are repeated with no evolution or completion. We don't encounter a new structure type, or a functional projection. The roundelay is not only thematic but grammatical: the grammar spins in a circle, repeating the same truncated structures, which are not completed into propositions.

4.3 'something there' (1974): Minimal Predication and Argument Structure Deficiency

'something there' (Beckett, 2012) is built on the oscillation between an indefinite pronoun ('something') and a deictic or expletive adverb ('there'). The poem exploits the grammatical ambiguity between three uses of 'there': (i) deictic, locating something in distal space; (ii) expletive, in the existential construction 'there is something'; and (iii) anaphoric, resuming a previously mentioned location. The opening lines:

something there
where
out there
out where

(Beckett, 2012, ll. 1–4)

Line 1 can be parsed in at least two ways:

(16a) [NP something] [AdvP there] NP + deictic
adverb (juxtaposition)

(16b) [TP there [T' [T is(Δ)] [NP something]]] expletive
construction, null copula

Under reading (16b) this is an existential construction with expletive 'there' and NP associate 'something'; the copula 'is' is null, a deficient T. Under reading (16a), 'something' and 'there' are juxtaposed without predication. Both readings produce an ALE structure licensed against the poem's implicit QUD.

Line 2, 'where', is a bare wh-pronoun:

(17) [CP [C where]]

Under sluicing analysis (Chung, Ladusaw and McCloskey, 1995), 'where' is the wh-remnant of a sluiced interrogative:

(18) [CP where [TP ... Δ (\times ANT^{nRL}) ...]]

The deleted TP should be recoverable from the prior ALE structure at line 1. However, that prior structure is itself antecedent-less: it provides a



discourse context but no propositional content from which the sluiced TP can be recovered. This produces **recursive ALE**: a sluice (ALE-2) whose antecedent is itself an ALE structure (ALE-1). The formal derivation is:

(19) ALE-1: QUD = "something is somewhere [where?]"
 → licenses line 1 [NP something][AdvP there] under
 χ ANT^{nRL}

ALE-2: QUD = "something is somewhere [where?]" +
 prior ALE-1

→ licenses line 2 [CP where [Δ (χ ANT^{nRL})]] under
 χ ANT^{nRL}

The sluice in ALE-2 is licensed against the QUD, not against the propositional content of ALE-1 (which is null). The QUD provides a formal discourse antecedent ('something is somewhere, but where?') that justifies the *wh*-interrogative structure, while the informational emptiness of ALE-1 ensures that the sluice cannot be resolved. The deletion stack adds to the interpretive under-determination with each line. The formalised recursion of ALE thus requires its licensing via QUD: without the QUD framework, recursive ALE would be a structurally arbitrary series of deletions without justification.

Lines 3 and 4 introduce a particle:

(20) [AdvP out [AdvP there]] 'out there'

(21) [CP out [C where]] 'out where'

The only difference between (20) and (21) is the replacement of the head: [AdvP there] for [C where]. This results in a minimal derivational pair: two derivations that differ by a single Merge operation, and which result in different syntactic categories, but identical phonological form. This confirms the incremental Merge seen in 4.1 and the fact that single-element External Merge is a characteristic of the late poems.

The argument structure of the implicit existential predicate is to be carefully analysed. There be requires a Theme θ and a Locative θ :

(22) [existential predicate]: ({Theme θ } , {Locative θ })

Theme θ = [NP something] existentially contentful,
 descriptively inert

Locative θ = [AdvP there] referentially active,
 pragmatically unanchorable

Let's begin with some terminological clarifications. Something is not semantically inert: as an indefinite pronoun, it contributes an existential quantifier over a variable, and asserts the existence of exactly one or



more entities - it is existentially committing. But it is descriptively empty: the restriction of the quantified variable is the empty set - no content is added to restrict quantification in the form of a predicate. Likewise, 'there' is referentially inert - it has a Locative theta-role - but pragmatically unanchorable in the context of the poem: no spatial point of reference is available to resolve the deictic. A proposition results in the form:

$$(23) \exists x [P(x) \wedge Q(x)] \text{ where } P = \{ \} \text{ (empty restriction)} \\ \text{and } Q = \{ \} \text{ (unresolvable deictic)}$$

This is a well-formed existential formula that is trivially satisfied for any assignment of an unrestricted variable: $\exists x[\emptyset(x) \wedge \emptyset(x)]$ holds for any x in any domain. The proposition is not false; it is uninformative. **ASD** is therefore more precisely defined as: a configuration in which theta-roles are discharged onto arguments that are existentially contentful but descriptively inert, producing propositions that are formally truth-evaluable but carry zero truth-conditional discriminating power. This is the formal sense in which the poem generates near-nothing: the propositional machinery is intact, but its output is the most informationally impoverished proposition natural language can generate.

5. Discussion

5.1 ALE, the Identity Condition, and the NSC Alternative

The analysis in Section 4 demonstrates that Beckett's late poetry generates antecedent-less ellipsis systematically across all three poems. The theoretical question is whether this should be analysed as a form of ellipsis (the ALE analysis proposed here) or as base-generated non-sentential constituents (the NSC analysis of Barton, 1990; Stainton, 2006). Three arguments favour the ALE analysis over the NSC analysis.

Argument 1 Internal structure: the NSC analysis cannot account for the internal clausal structure of complex fragments. The raising chain 'for to need to seem to glimpse' in example (8) contains three embedded TPs, all of which would need to be base-generated as part of a bare phrase under the NSC analysis, structurally implausible. The ALE analysis generates this structure naturally as a multi-clausal infinitival chain with progressive VP ellipsis at each embedded level.

Argument 2 Categorical distribution: under Merchant's (2004) fragment analysis, movement remnants consistently appear in focus-prominent, utterance-initial positions characteristic of A-bar movement



targets. All of Beckett's fragments display this categorical property: nominals, PPs, AdvPs, and wh-elements occupy the utterance-initial position that would be expected if they had moved to [Spec, FP]. This distributional regularity is unexplained under the NSC analysis, which makes no prediction about the categorical position of base-generated bare phrases.

Argument 3 Parsimony: a unified ALE analysis accounts for all fragment types; simple and complex, nominal and prepositional, declarative and interrogative, through a single mechanism: E-feature licensing against a QUD-antecedent. The NSC analysis would require a different pragmatic licensing account for each fragment type, without capturing the structural uniformity across the corpus.

The ALE analysis maintains that Beckett's fragments are elliptical in structure, licensed by an E-feature, but that the identity condition is satisfied against a QUD-antecedent that is informationally empty. This is formally distinguished from standard ellipsis (where the QUD-antecedent is informationally contentful and LF-recovery succeeds) and from the NSC analysis (where no deletion occurs at all). The three-way distinction is:

Standard ellipsis: E-feature + QUD-antecedent with informational content → PF-deletion + successful LF-recovery.

ALE (poetic): E-feature + QUD-antecedent with null informational content → PF-deletion + LF-under-determination.

NSC: no E-feature + no deletion → pragmatic interpretation of bare phrase.

5.2 Hypergrammaticality, Ungrammaticality, and Syntactic Economy

The paper's central thesis requires refinement in light of the analysis of example (7). The claim that Beckett's syntax is 'hypergrammatical' requires both formal definition and internal differentiation.

A **hypergrammatical** derivation, as used in this paper, is defined as follows: a derivation D is hypergrammatical if (i) D satisfies all formal licensing conditions at PF (the output is phonologically well-formed and convergent by MP standards) and (ii) D produces under-determined or informationally impoverished content at LF, as a result of maximally exploiting the grammar's economy conditions. Hypergrammaticality is distinct from ungrammaticality, in which D fails to satisfy licensing conditions at one or both interfaces, and from standard grammaticality, in which D satisfies licensing conditions at both interfaces and produces fully recoverable content at LF. Hypergrammaticality is not a pre-existing term of art in the literature and is introduced here as a coinage specific to





the analysis of poetic grammar; it should not be confused with uses of the term in other theoretical contexts (e.g., Newmeyer, 2005, who uses the term differently in a typological context).

Two structural types can now be distinguished in Beckett's late poems. **Type A Hypergrammatical:** structures that satisfy all formal MP licensing conditions at PF but produce under-determined LF content. ALE fragments, deficient TPs, and ASD configurations all fall into this category. They are well-formed at PF and formally convergent; they fail only at the level of LF informational content, because the operations that would generate that content (functional projection, argument retrieval, antecedent identification) are either absent or systematically suppressed. **Type B Ungrammatical:** structures that violate the structural requirements of bare phrase structure. The headless adjunct stacking of example (7) falls into this category: no phrase-structural head is present, violating the fundamental requirement of bare phrase structure that every merged object have a projecting head. The output of (7) cannot be assigned a phrase marker by standard MP rules.

The revised thesis is: Beckett's near-nothing syntax operates primarily through Type A hypergrammatical structures, but at its furthest extreme in the penultimate sequence of 'what is the word' it briefly crosses into Type B ungrammaticality, before the final line returns to the poem's only complete grammatical clause. This oscillation hypergrammatical, then ungrammatical, then grammatical, is not incidental but constitutes the formal enactment of the poem's thematic trajectory: failing better, arriving at the vanishing point, and then naming it.

5.3 Argument Structure Deficiency and Theta-Role Ghosting

The Theta Criterion (Chomsky, 1981) stipulates that each argument receive a single theta-role and that every theta-role be filled by a single argument. The work on ASD in the three poems shows that Beckett's late syntax is formally compliant with the Theta Criterion, and informationally draining.

This paper introduces the term 'theta-role ghosting' to describe this configuration, as follows: theta-role ghosting is a configuration in which (i) a predicate's theta-grid is formally discharged - each theta-role is assigned to exactly one argument position, satisfying the Theta Criterion - but (ii) every argument receiving a theta-role is either a null element (UNA, PRO), an existentially contentful but descriptively inert element



(‘something’), or a referentially active but pragmatically unanchorable element (‘there’, ‘what’), such that (iii) the predicate’s argument structure generates no descriptively contentful proposition. Theta-role ghosting is different from theta-role violation (in which the Theta Criterion is not satisfied), and different from standard predication (in which theta-roles are satisfied by contentful arguments). It is the third alternative: formalism without information.

Theta-role ghosting is not unique to the ASD configuration: it also occurs within ALE structures where the elided argument position (Δ) is the bearer of a theta-role. In example (9), the Theme θ of ‘glimpse’ is assigned to a null element (Δ) under ALE licensing. The Theta Criterion is satisfied (the role has been assigned to an argument); the argument is informationally null (it cannot be recovered from the QUD-antecedent). Theta-role ghosting in ALE structures is thus a consequence of ALE’s core mechanism: deletion licensed against an informationally empty antecedent produces arguments whose theta-roles are assigned but whose informational content is null.

5.4 Empirical Predictions

The theoretical analyses proposed ALE, deficient functional projection, and ASD generate a set of testable predictions that extend beyond the present corpus and invite future empirical investigation.

First, the ALE analysis predicts that antecedent-less fragments should be licensed whenever a salient but informationally empty QUD is established in discourse. Cross-poetic investigation would constitute a productive testing ground: other minimalist poetic traditions; George Oppen’s Objectivist verse, Paul Celan’s late German fragments, Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés*, are candidate sites for ALE structures licensed by similar informationally-empty QUDs. A comparative corpus study would allow verification of whether ALE is a genre-specific or poet-specific strategy, and whether the QUD-based licensing mechanism generalises across languages.

Second, the deficient functional projection account generates a structural prediction grounded in the neurolinguistics of syntax. Grodzinsky’s





(2000) work on agrammatic aphasia demonstrates that damage to Broca's area produces a systematic impoverishment of functional categories: patients produce verbless clauses, reduced argument structures, and absent T projections strikingly similar to those analysed in Section 4.2. The resemblance is structurally motivated: both agrammatic speech and Beckett's late poetry generate derivations that terminate below the functional domain, for different reasons (neurological damage versus deliberate grammatical choice) but with convergent structural outcomes. Similarly, Radford's (1990) account of early first language acquisition demonstrates that children in the pre-functional stage produce deficient-functional-projection structures before T and C projections emerge. The prediction is that Beckett's late poems should parse more readily for individuals with grammatical profiles, not because the content is simpler, but because the phrase-structural profile is more closely matched to their syntactic competence.

Third, the ASD analysis generates predictions for psycholinguistic processing. If theta-roles are formally assigned to descriptively inert arguments, the parser should attempt retrieval of the argument's descriptive content and fail, producing a distinctive processing signature: longer reading times at theta-assigning predicates (such as 'glimpse' in example (8)) and at argument positions occupied by 'something' or UNA. Self-paced reading experiments using the late poems as stimuli, with theta-assigning verbs as critical regions, would permit direct testing of this prediction. Such experiments would also allow the ALE and standard ellipsis conditions to be compared processing-theoretically, testing whether QUD-antecedent emptiness produces a measurable increase in LF-recovery difficulty.

6. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated, through formal syntactic analysis drawing on the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995, 2001), ellipsis theory (Merchant, 2001, 2004), and the QUD framework (Roberts, 1996; Buring, 2003), that Samuel Beckett's late English poetry, specifically 'what is the word' (1989), 'Roundelay' (1976), and 'something there'





(1974) is characterised by a grammatically principled set of syntactic strategies that approach but do not reach the null structure of pure silence.

We have established three main results. First, antecedent-less ellipsis (ALE) is the hallmarks of Beckett's fragments. ALE is formally rooted in the QUD paradigm: PF-deletion is licensed by an E-feature against an informationally null QUD-antecedent (LF-underdetermination). In the most radical instance ('something there'), ALE is recursive: a sluice licensed by an ALE-antecedent, with the QUD providing the formal (but informationally empty) basis for both instances of licensing. Second, Beckett's derivations exhibit deficient functional projection: the derivations stop at the lexical level, producing null T, no C and bare NP/PP projections. The null subjects of the derivations are unanchored null arguments (UNAs) due to deficient functional projection. Third, argument structure deficiency (ASD) is rife in the corpus: theta-roles are formally discharged through theta-role ghosting, thus satisfying the Theta Criterion, but with no descriptive propositional content.

The paper also nuances its key argument by carving out a wide class of hypergrammatical structures (Type A: PF-convergent, LF-impoorished) from a handful of ungrammatical structures (Type B: bare phrase structure violated). The co-existence of the two in the last sequence of 'what is the word' is not a theoretical problem but rather its solution: the poem gives a taste of near-nothing syntax by switching between the inside and the outside of the grammatical limit.

For theories of ellipsis, the results apply the QUD-based licensing account (Roberts, 1996; Griffiths and Lipták, 2014) to scenarios where the QUD-antecedent is also informationally deficient, suggesting that QUD-based licensing does not necessarily lead to LF-recovery. For the Minimalist Program, the systematic poverty of functional projections indicates a possible parametric difference between poetic grammar and other grammars. For empirical linguistics, the analysis makes predictions about the occurrence of the configuration in agrammatic aphasia, language development and processing. Syntax of almost nothing is, ironically, highly formalised.





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