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"Drop the verb if you can. Otherwise use proforms (in the same way other people do), but do it according to the rules," or

The Non-Repetition of Lexical Verb Structures

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It is virtually impossible to be totally explicit in every sentence we utter; life is just too short. Speakers in most situations, therefore, roughly follow Grice's maxim of quantity, making their utterance only as informative as it needs to be. They achieve this economy by leaving certain items unspecified, assuming (as part of the Cooperative Principle) that the listener will understand these unspecified items in a particular way. The listener knows which items have been left unspecified, because sentences have a defined grammatical structure with certain slots to be filled, e.g. subject, lexical verb, time adverbial.

Depending on the type of grammatical element it is, an unspecified item can be understood broadly in one of two ways: either the item has been left unspecified because it is unimportant, irrelevant or of no interest (as when the place adverbial slot is left unfilled with many verbs – not with all); or it has been left unspecified because it is so obvious from the context that the listener can be safely left to supply it (as is usually the case in English when a past tense verb occurs without an accompanying time adverbial). The following example should make the difference clear:

(1) I bought an "Independent" (somewhere or other) [on that day].

In my article on "Deletion and proform reduction" I referred to these

two cases as "indefinite deletion" and "contextual deletion" respectively. It is the second type of non-specification that concerns us here.

If left to supply a missing item, listeners most naturally turn to the immediately preceding context. Here they are helped by a further convention, which might be expressed thus: "assume that things have remained constant unless you hear to the contrary." In other words the default value for each element in a sentence is the one it was set at before. One very important question that needs to be asked, is how this default value is expressed. I will here concentrate on just one aspect of this issue.

My title is meant to be an illustration of the narrower field I wish to consider, viz. the need to avoid repetition of the verb, in particular of the LEXICAL verb, by making use of one of the repetition-avoiding devices provided by the English language. The precise question I want to ask is what devices English has for avoiding repetition of the same lexical verb and its dependents, and in what cases each of these devices is used. Such devices for sentence reduction are of course grammatical patterns. However, they operate not only between clauses but also between sentences – frequently between the utterances of two different speakers. They therefore fall into the field of discourse grammar, or dialogue syntax. This field is sometimes thought of as somewhat vague and disorganized. I hope to show that, on the contrary, it has very clear rules, although some of them are subject to dialect variation.

Consider for instance the (invented) quotation of my title. I chose it to illustrate some of the different possibilities of repetition-avoidance for the lexical verb and its dependents. It only takes a moment's thought to realize that two different reduction strategies are involved. In the first sentence the lexical verb structure *drop the verb* is carried forward in meaning from the main clause to the conditional clause, but instead of being repeated, it is simply dropped. However, its absence means that the *if*-clause is clearly incomplete, and that the listener or reader is obviously required to reconstruct the missing item from the main clause. This type of reduction is generally referred to as ELLIPSIS.

The main alternative type of repetition avoidance is the use of a PROFORM, i.e. a grammatical word or phrase that has little or no lexical meaning of its own but is required to take on the meaning of an item of the same grammatical class from the surrounding context, as when pronouns like *it*, *them* link up with the meaning of an adjacent noun phrase or with some entity in the situational context. For an instance of verbal proforms,

we can go to the second sentence of the quotation in our title, where we can describe the phrase *do it* as a proform that has taken the place of the lexical verb structure *use proforms*. The verb *do* in the parenthesized clause might also be regarded as a proform standing for the same lexical verb structure, but it is preferable to analyse it as an empty auxiliary. Further possible proforms for the lexical verb structure are *do that* and *do so*.

Given the variety of different ways of avoiding repetition of the lexical verb structure, it is natural to ask how free a choice the speaker has among them, both between ellipsis and reduction-to-proform, and then between the various proform possibilities. In the first case . . . *if you can*, for instance, as an alternative to the gap produced by ellipsis, the proform *do* would be possible, if slightly less natural, with the same meaning; but *do it*, *do that* and *do so* would either be unnatural or have the wrong meaning. What then are the rules for the use of these different repetition-avoiding strategies?

To understand this problem, it is first necessary to distinguish, independently of the two strategies of reduction, two degrees of reduction, which I shall term MILD REDUCTION and SEVERE REDUCTION. We can represent the difference in the form of clauses they produce as follows:

UNREDUCED:	NP subject (+ auxiliary/-ies) + lexical verb structure
MILD REDUCTION:	pronoun subject (+ auxiliary/-ies) + DO IT
SEVERE REDUCTION:	pronoun subject + finite aux./BE

We can illustrate both types of reduction by considering two different possible continuations, (3)(a) and (b) in the context of (2):

(2) I can't imagine why Bill's painting the door mauve.
(3) (a) He's doing it for Mary.

(2) I can't imagine why Bill's painting the door mauve.
(3) (b) But I'm absolutely sure that he is.

In the first case, mild reduction, the subject pronoun *he* has replaced

Bill, but, more importantly for us, the meaning 'is painting the door mauve' is represented by the verb phrase *'s doing it*, which we can break down into the finite auxiliary *is* (which has simply been retained) and the proform *doing it*, the required variant of DO IT. In the second case, severe reduction, we see that only the finite auxiliary remains, the lexical verb structure having been totally ellipted. Once again, the two patterns cannot be freely exchanged, given that the same context is retained, cf.:

(4) (a) ?He is for Mary.
(b) ?But I'm absolutely sure that he is doing it.

The reason for this is that mild reduction and severe reduction have rather different meanings and typical contexts. Essentially the difference is that whereas mild reduction simply refers to a verbal activity without questioning whether it forms part of a true statement, severe ellipsis is used when the speaker is mainly concerned with whether the event took place or not. Moreover while mild reduction can freely refer back from one independent sentence to a previous one by the same speaker (possibly a sentence or more earlier) or can make reference to something in the situational context that has never been mentioned, severe reduction – with ellipsis of the lexical verb structure – is largely limited to response sentences by one's fellow speaker and afterthoughts by oneself. These response sentences and afterthoughts typically confirm, reinforce, modify or deny a previous assertion, as in the following examples:

(5) (a) You wouldn't like me to cut your toenails, would you? Yes, I would.
(b) You must have been waiting for me to ask. Yes, I was.
(c) They seemed to need cutting. They (certainly) did, yes.
(d) I think that's short enough. (Yes), I'm sure it is.
(e) D'you usually have them cut by a professional? I did last week.
(f) If you did, they didn't make a very good job of it.

Fundamentally these response sentences simply agree or disagree with the previous full sentence. (They could alternatively have been negative.) It is worth noting that after a pure *yes/no* question, the response *yes/no* alone would suffice, with the elliptical response sentences being only optional. They basically have the form of tag statements, i.e. a statement version of tag questions; but it is not satisfactory to dismiss them as tags in these post-statement examples, i.e. (5)(b), (c), (d), because there they are

probably more necessary than the word *yes* or *no*.

In a way the most interesting of the examples of (5) is the next-to-last one (e), to which the answer is neither *yes* or *no*, but, if anything, *well*. Although the question is about polarity, the answer introduces a semantic modification, in the form of an adverbial phrase *last week*. This adverbial apparently does not have an explicit lexical verb structure to modify. In this sense it can be compared with the last example in the title, viz. *do it according to the rules*; but whereas *do it* simply involves a reference back to a previous lexical verb structure, with no emphasis on polarity, the examples of (5) are all about affirmation and denial. If we change *did* to *did it* in (5)(e), we change its meaning from affirmative to mere back-reference, and the question of whether "I did it" or not ceases to be an issue and is rather taken for granted. In (5)(f) we find repetition avoidance in an *if* clause, and although there is strictly no assertion or denial, the issue of polarity – yes or no – is clearly crucial; in fact the function of such a conditional clause is to postulate one of two alternative states of affairs, implicitly contrasting it with its negative or positive counterpart.

Consider these further examples of mild and severe ellipsis compared:

(6) (a) Are they going to write to Mary?
?They may do it. / They may.

(b) The question is whether they ever write to Mary beforehand.
(?) They do it sometimes. They do sometimes.

(c) He keeps worrying about when they will write to Mary.
(I don't know what he's worried about.) They did it months ago. /
?They did months ago.

Once again it seems that when the issue is a polar distinction between "yes" and "no," severe reduction is always preferred, whereas when this is not an issue and the important question is something else like what "he" worries about or when "they" will write, mild ellipsis is the norm. A further factor is the proximity of the full version of the lexical verb structure: if another sentence intervenes (cf. (6)(c)), severe reduction becomes impossible.

In the analysis of severe reduction given above there was reference to a finite auxiliary (which we have since seen in (5)(a), (b) and (c), also (6)(a)) and also reference to BE even as a non-auxiliary (= main verb) (which we

have since seen in (5)(d)), but no reference to a proform, despite the occurrence of DO in (5)(c), (e) and (f), also (6)(b). This is because DO (unlike DO IT) is not a proform for the missing lexical verb structure, which has simply been dropped, but rather an empty auxiliary, which is used to fill the required slot whenever no semantically full auxiliary (e.g. WOULD, MAY, perfect HAVE, progressive BE) has been selected. This is a pervasive pattern of English syntax (known as DO-support) and is found not only in negative, interrogative and emphatic sentences but also in structures like this (which F.R. Palmer (23-4), following Firth (104), puts under the heading of CODE, pointing out, however, that H.E. Palmer and Blandford (124-5) use the expression "avoidance of repetition"!).

This does not mean, however, that DO alone is never used as a proform for the lexical verb structure. Some speakers use it regularly where perhaps the majority would use ellipsis, and they may even use the empty auxiliary DO and the lexical verb structure proform DO side by side. This is particularly the case when the form of the lexical verb required to be understood in the response sentence does not match the one found in the context sentence, cf.:

(7) (a) Will you be voting for us? I already have (done).
(b) Why don't you support us? I already am (doing).
(c) Are you voting for us this time? I did (do) last time.

Although the forms without a (second) DO are more normal, those with DO are used by many British speakers, and the pattern seems a consistent one, in that they only allow ellipsis of an identical lexical verb form (e.g. *voting* for *voting*; *voted* for *voted*); otherwise a proform DO is required, to carry the new inflectional suffix *-ing*, *-ed*, *-en* or *∅*. In any case the DO used by the speaker in such a context is a true lexical verb structure proform, and one that is used in response sentences with a meaning of affirmation or denial.

In contexts where mere back-reference to a lexical verb structure is required, we have noticed that DO IT is common, although we will need to note certain important limitations on its use. In general, it can replace the whole of a lexical verb phrase, and in doing this, it adopts a matching inflectional form (just like the dialect-restricted DO we have just considered), cf.:

(8) (a) So she did put the cake in the oven, then (?) Yes, she did it while you were out.
(b) Fancy breaking a glass! I've never done it before.
(c) Who kept me awake last night with that drumming? I've no idea who did it, but it wasn't me.

In all the examples of (8) DO IT is a natural way of avoiding repetition of the lexical verb structure, but in all cases DO THAT would have been a slightly more emphatic alternative. In fact in (8)(b) DO THAT would probably be the preferred alternative, if the second sentence were spoken by a different speaker, as it also is in (9):

(9) A: John trims his moustache every day.
B: You won't catch me doing that.

Although DO THAT is always a possible alternative to DO IT, the reverse is not the case, as Quirk *et al.* point out (*Grammar of Contemporary English* 690-93; *Comprehensive Grammar* 876-79). Consider the following examples:

(10) A: The old lady fell over on her way to church.
B: Has she ever done that (/?done it) before?

(11) A: John's broken a glass in the kitchen by the sound of it.
B: Does he do that (/?do it) often?

(12) A: Those halogen lamps can cause cancer.
B: Can they do that (/?do it) even when they're turned off?

It would seem that DO IT can only be used when the lexical verb structure refers to an intended voluntary act by the subject agent, who naturally has to be a human being (or in extended use, especially by pet-owners, a higher animal), a condition which applies perfectly to the examples of (9) but not to those of (10), (11) and (12). Thus although on the face of it DO IT and DO THAT appear to correspond in meaning exactly (as normal and emphatic as the words *it* and *that* suggest) DO IT seems to have taken on a narrower value with its meaning of deliberate action.

Furthermore there are kinds of lexical verb structure for which neither DO IT nor even DO THAT is possible, e.g.:

(13) A: Bill has always felt rather persecuted. His mother used to read Kafka to him when he was very young.
B: Does he even feel like that (/?do that/*do it) at home?

(14) A: Jane owns two Rolls Royces, but her husband is unhappy about it.
B: Did she own them (/*do that/*do it) when she met him?

In such contexts it seems that it is usually necessary to repeat the lexical verb with a proform version of its dependents (e.g., *it*, *them*, etc. for noun phrases, *like that* for adjective phrases). Alternatively, the lexical verb can be replaced with a synonym, a superordinate lexeme, or a general verb, e.g. *possess* or *have* in the case of (14).

So far we have considered DO, DO IT and DO THAT as possible lexical verb structure proforms (or empty auxiliaries), but we have neglected DO SO. The first thing to note about DO SO is that in British English at least it is largely limited to formal and written English, and there are probably speakers who do not use it at all; on the other hand, in formal, particularly American formal English it seems relatively common. If we ask how it compares with the other forms in its meaning and use, we get a surprisingly mixed kind of answer, in that it apparently appears as an alternative to the empty auxiliary DO, to the (British) proform DO, and to the proform DO IT, although not in all their uses.

Consider the following possible (formal) DO SO variants of the different examples we have examined above:

(3) (a') He's doing so for Mary. [= painting the door mauve]
(5) (c') They seemed to need cutting. ?They (certainly) did so, yes.
(5) (e') D'you usually have them cut by a professional? I did so last week.
(6) (a') Are they going to write to Mary? They may do so.
(6) (c') They did so months ago. [= wrote to Mary]
(7) (a') Will you be voting for us? I've already done so.
(7) (b') Why don't you support us? I'm already doing so.
(7) (c') Are you voting for us this time? I did (?do) so last time.
(8) (a') Yes, she did so while you were out. [= put the cake in the oven]
(8) (b') Fancy breaking a glass. ?I've never done so before.
(9') John trims his moustache every day. You won't catch me doing so.
(10') The old lady fell over (. . .). ?Has she ever done so before?
(11') John's broken a glass (. . .). ?Does he do so often?

(14') Jane owns two Rolls Royces (. . .). ?Did she do so when she met him?

Not being a frequent user of DO SO, I am rather unsure of my intuitions about what English speakers would generally expect to say or hear, but if the above judgements are anything like correct, then DO SO must have similar restrictions on its use to DO IT, i.e. it must be limited to intentional actions.

There is a further aspect of the meaning of DO SO that is worthy of comment, viz. its analytic interpretation as DO plus SO. The form SO is regularly used in English as a proform for complementation clauses of verbs like *say* and *think*, and something of this meaning seems to be found in uses like:

(15) He asked me to turn the radio down, and I did so.
(16) Don't do so just because he said so.

In such cases DO SO seems to become favoured partly through interference from the clause proform SO, even though the latter would not strictly be appropriate after *do*, which does not allow clause complementation.

Let us finally sum up the different repetition avoidance strategies we have considered:

SEVERE REDUCTION:
- with polar affirmative-negative meaning
- empty auxiliary, if required
- ellipsis of lexical verb structure; or proform DO for some British speakers
- proform DO SO in formal/American English in the context of intentional actions

MILD REDUCTION:
- with '(factual) back-reference' meaning
- proform DO THAT, with a relatively emphatic meaning, in the context of any action (rather than state)
- proform DO IT, or in formal/American English DO SO, in the context of intentional actions.

This all seems like a rather complex system, partly as a result of the

"intrusion" of DO SO. It is not surprising that the system presents problems to foreign learners, who tend to overuse DO SO, to some extent, perhaps because of its novelty value compared with their native language. Certainly other languages do use different patterns: for instance German has severe reduction without an auxiliary, as in *Ich nicht* or *Aber ich* corresponding to English *I don't*, *I haven't*, etc. or *I do*, *I have*, etc. respectively. Such structures and their contextual limitations have not been given sufficient attention in grammars. What we need is a true dialogue syntax with a partly comparative orientation.

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