Problem Set #1

Sluicing, or ellipsis: What does it teaches us? Do languages vary?

English examples in (1) display a 'rule' of syntax that we discussed informally in class as *wh-movement*. Bracketed phrases in (1) *what he bought* and *who bought it* function as if they were a direct object of *know*, called **embedded questions**. *Wh-* movement is happening inside the embedded questions (which are in turn inside of the main clause).

(1)   a.   John bought something, but I don't know [*what* he bought].
        b.   Someone bought the painting, but I don't know [*who* bought it].

Consider now the examples below in (2). These sentences have the identical meaning as the corresponding examples in (1) but have only a *wh*-word as the direct object of *know*. The phenomenon seen in (2) goes by the somewhat bizarre name of *Sluicing*.

(2)   a.   John bought something, but I don't know [*what*].
        b.   Someone bought the painting, but I don't know [*who*].

Clearly, in some real sense, the bracketed portions of (2) do the identical "job" as the fuller forms in (1). How does this work, exactly? Consider two possibilities:

Possibility 1: The "ellipsis" hypothesis
- A "sluiced" expression like the bracketed portions of (2a-b) is a full clause (i.e. an embedded question) in which *wh*-movement has occurred.
- After *wh*-movement occurs, an optional process of *ellipsis* applies. **Ellipsis** is a deletion 'rule' that eliminates a specific portion of the clause leaving only the remainder of the clause pronounced.
- Ellipsis of a phrase X is possible only if X is *identical to* another phrase found elsewhere in the sentence or the discourse (its **antecedent**) — except for using a *wh*-word *who* for a word like *someone*[1] (antecedent).
- If this possibility is on the right track, then the bracketed portion of (2a-b) has exactly the same syntax as the bracketed portion of (1a-b), except that ellipsis has got rid of everything but the moved *wh*-phrase *what*: e.g. *but I don't know*
  [what ~~he bought~~ _].

[1] Sluicing doesn't actually require the specific words *someone* or *something*. Other "indefinite" phrases like *a certain book* are also fine — but let's ignore that here.

Possibility 2: The "what you see is what you get" hypothesis

- A sluiced expression, such as bracketed portions of (2a-b), is *not* a full clause in which *wh*-movement has occured. It is just a simple *wh*-phrase that happens to function as the direct object of *know* (e.g., What you see is what you get).

- The semantic component of language designates a meaning to the *wh*-phrase in this construction, which is *similar* to the meaning of an embedded question like *what John bought* but nonetheless arises from a very different syntax.

- Thus, a phrase like *I don't know what* in (2a) apparenlty means something like 'I don't know the identity of the inanimate object involved in this situation'. This reading is possible because *the inanimate object involved in this situation* is one of the things that the word *what* can mean. A speaker of English uses his general knowledge about the topics that are under discussion to figure out which "object" is being referred to — e.g. the thing that John bought in (2a).

- If this possibility is on the right track, then bracketed portions of a sentences, like in (2a), do *not* have the same syntax as the bracketed portion of (1a), and no ellipsis takes place in Sluicing.

Question 1:
The examples in (3) and (4) provide the basis of an *argument* for one of these possibilities over the other. Give the argument. (If you think the opposing hypothesis can be rescued — for example by making it a bit more precise — do so.) Make sure you mention each relevant example. Feel free to add other examples of your own.

(3)   a. *There was a fatal accident on I-95, but I don't know *who*.
       b. *Yesterday was election day, but I don't know *who*.
       c. *Today's my birthday, but I don't know *what*.

(4)   a. *John bought the painting yesterday, but I don't know *who*.
       b. *John bought the painting yesterday, but I don't know *what*.
       c. *Someone bought the painting yesterday, but I don't know *what*.
       d. *John bought something yesterday, but I don't know *who*.