**Subject drop and a narrative garden path in Christie's *Murder is Easy***
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### 1. Goals of the paper

This presentation covers a number of distinct though related goals. The empirical material investigated is one detective story by Agatha Christie *Murder is Easy;* the grammatical pattern investigated is subject drop, typically associated with abbreviated registers such as diary writing, or with informal spoken English.

(i) The main focus is the phenomenon of subject drop as deployed by Agatha Christie in the story *Murder is Easy*. The paper briefly discusses the properties of register-specific subject drop and then shows how this device is used by Christie in her stories and how it is here specifically deployed to create referential ambiguity and thus, a.o. it is used in the detective story to introduce clues and red herrings.

(ii)     (ii) Pursuing the role of the ambiguous line in the text also reveals an interesting subplot in the story which upon first reading may wall go undetected and in which Christie exploits social class distinctions as motivations.

(iii)     Related to this, a final **section will** briefly **illustrate how the English subject drop pattern raises particular problems** for translators into Dutch, Italian and French, because none of these languages has the exact equivalent of English subject drop.

On a more speculative and general note, by showing the relevance of exploring grammatical patterns to literary texts and how ambiguity can be used in fabrication of plots (and subplots), this paper can bridge the gap between **the study of linguistics and the study of literature**. Material such as this which combines linguistic insights with literary work can also be used to introduce and attract **secondary school** pupils to linguistics.

### 2. Plot development in Agatha Christie

Agatha Christie's detective stories are essentially of the 'whodunnit' genre, starting with one or more crimes (usually murders), bringing to the fore multiple suspects and in the final *dénouement* revealing the perpetrator of the crime, showing that he or she had (i) the capacity and (ii) opportunity to commit the crime, as well as (iii) tracing his or her motive. The *dénouement* is achieved through the agency of a lead investigator, e.g. Miss Marple, Hercule Poirot etc. When developing her intricate plots, Christie also deploys grammatical and stylistic tools to create clues and red herrings for the alternative solutions to the mystery (Dutta Flanders 2017, Seago 2014). For instance, both in *The Mirror Cracked from side to side* and in *The clocks* she exploits the referential ambivalence of the pronoun *she* to create a garden path ambiguity.

The present presentation focusses on another instance of Christie's deployment of referential ambiguity as a tool in developing the plotline but in this case the ambiguity is created by subject drop, a device restricted to informal speech and to specific written registers, the best known being diary writing. In the work under discussion, Christie misleads the reader by means of a 'garden path' ambiguity, creating a red herring and carefully ensuring that the reader entertains the inappropriate interpretation of a referential ambiguity till the moment of *denouement*.

### 3. A garden path ambiguity and subject drop

*Creating the garden path*. In *Murder is Easy (*which appeared also as *Easy to Kill,* the version used here, Phoenix publishing), the 'garden path' ambiguity is created by the grammatical device of subject drop. This grammatical pattern, characteristic of informal spoken English, will first be introduced and set against the more general background of agent demoting devices, after which Christie's use of subject drop and its implications for the development of the plotline will be considered in detail. Second conjunct subject ellipsis will

also be shown to be highly relevant for the discussion. The pivotal passage which is the focus of the discussion is (1), with the crucial line italicized:

> (1) Matter of fact we had a bit of a row over something. Blinking bird she had – one of those beastly tittering canaries – always hated them – bad business – *wrung its neck*. (*Murder is Easy*: 178)

Two interpretations of *wrung its neck* are in competition: (i) 'I', i.e. the speaker, which is the default interpretation of the sentence in isolation, and (ii) 'she', the discourse topic, an interpretation which is consistent with the containing context. The second (admitted less likely) interpretation turns out to be correct. Interpreted correctly, this passage provides a clue to the identification of the perpetrator of the crime, by revealing their killer instinct, i.e. their capacity for killing, and their motive for the murders. It will be shown that Christie does not only use subject drop in this particular context, but it is a device that characterizes (mainly male) informal speech throughout the story: the subject omitted may be first or third person, with switches from one to the other within paragraphs.

**The construction of the ambiguity** The paper examines in detail the precise **build u**p of the ambiguity through various devices in (1) and its surrounding context.

*Maintaining the garden path* It will be shown that by virtue of **second conjunct subject** ellipsis the crucial line *wrung its neck* is echoed verbatim at various later passages in the text reconnecting back to the ultimate cause of the crimes. Through these passages, Christie maintains the garden path ambiguity, initially reinforcing the misleading default interpretation, and subsequently reversing to the correct interpretation.

### 4. A subplot

The presentation will also bring to the fore an interesting subplot developed in parallel with the garden path and which develops the relation between two of the 'candidate subjects/suspects', Gordon Whitfield and Honoria Waynflete. The subtheme of their class and gender inequality is woven through the story.

### 5. Grammar lost in translation

The presentation will briefly discuss how the pivotal sentence in the plot development of *Murder is Easy, wrung its neck* in (1), which gives rise to the garden path in English, is rendered in the Dutch, Italian and French translations. This issue is of interest because the grammars of the three languages examined here lack the subject drop pattern illustrated in (1) and thus deploy different strategies for agent demotion which lead to different implications. (cf. Mey 1991: page 242, note 4). The choice of languages is motivated as follows.

(i) **Dutch** deploys some form of **third person topic drop** in informal speech. In recent work, van Kampen (2020a,b) has shown that the device is severely restricted in spoken Dutch. In addition not all Dutch speakers accept subject drop in speech (1).

(ii) As a **pro drop language**, Italian allows systematic subject drop but at the same time subject ellipsis by virtue of pro drop rarely induces referential ambiguity thanks to the rich inflectional system, so the language also lacks a good equivalent of (1).

(iii) In spoken French, spoken subject drop is uncommon; the pattern is found in written registers, but in the **written** form subject drop fails to introduce referential ambiguity because of the availability of finite inflection which will allow full recovery of the intended underlying subject.