In this talk, I defend the view that ellipsis occurs during the narrow syntax (Aelbrecht 2010), reviewing existing and new evidence of apparent rule ordering configurations between ellipsis and other grammatical operations. I attempt to situate ellipsis within the overall timeline of the derivation by showing that, whereas ellipsis may precede or follow certain narrow-syntactic operations (e.g. agreement, movement), it evidently cannot follow any postsyntactic operations (e.g. external sandhi phenomena, allomorphy). I argue that this follows from the modular, derivational architecture of grammar familiar from Minimalism, but only if ellipsis is effected in the narrow syntax, and not strictly at PF (as is sometimes assumed or explicitly claimed; Merchant 2001, LaCara 2018, a.o.).

Movement and agreement are two phenomena widely regarded as taking place during the derivation (i.e. they are not purely post-syntactic/PF phenomena). Crucially, ellipsis has the capacity to disrupt both of these operations, something which would be impossible if ellipsis were strictly a PF non-realization rule (e.g.). First, we have known since Ross (1969) that phrasal movement out of ellipsis sites is in principle possible. However, Aelbrecht (2010) shows that certain kinds of ellipsis can bleed certain kinds of phrasal movement. For example, object wh-extraction is prohibited out of otherwise well-formed Modal Complement Ellipsis sites in Dutch:

(1) Ik weet niet wie Jan MOET uitnodigen, maar ik weet wel wie hij niet MAG *(uitnodigen wie).
   ‘I don’t know who Jan must invite, but I do know who he isn’t ALLOWED to invite.’

Likewise, in a language that normally requires object agreement on T (Hoca k: Johnson 2015), this agreement is blocked if the transitive predicate is elided, again suggesting that ellipsis (of VP, containing the object) precedes a decidedly syntactic operation (Agree, between T and the now-missing object):

(2) Cecil-PROP me 1OBJ-hit and Hunter-PROP also (*1OBJ)-do
   ‘Cecil hit me, and Hunter did too.’

This logic extends even to head movement, which some have argued to be a purely post-syntactic / PF phenomenon. Sailor (2018) shows that predicate ellipsis in certain verb-second languages (here, Norwegian) can prevent the main verb from moving into second position, again in what looks like a bleeding configuration of just the sort seen above:

(3) a. *Johan leste ikke Lolita, men Marie leste.
   Johan read.PAST not Lolita, but Marie read.PAST
   Intended: ‘Johan didn’t read Lolita, but Marie did.’

   Johan read.PAST not Lolita, but Marie do.PAST
   ‘Johan didn’t read Lolita, but Marie did.’

Given that ellipsis can destroy the input environment for these syntactic operations, it follows that ellipsis is itself syntactic, as proposed elsewhere in the literature (idem for head movement, given (3)).

If this conclusion is correct, it makes a heretofore under-explored prediction: if ellipsis is triggered during the syntactic derivation (as Aelbrecht proposes, and the above facts attest), then uncontroversially postsyntactic processes should uniformly follow it; i.e., they should only operate on the output of ellipsis. The second half of the talk presents novel data involving external sandhi phenomena and allomorphy that confirm this prediction.

First consider raddoppiamento fonosintattico (RF), a sandhi process within the Italo-Romance family in which certain word-initial consonants undergo gemination when preceded by a lexically-specified RF trigger (Maiden 1995:72-76). The extent to which RF is (in)sensitive to syntactic structure varies substantially across varieties (Fanciullo 1986); examples here come from an upper-southern Italian regional variety in which RF is essentially phonological. In our terms, that means RF in this variety applies “late”,

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Situating ellipsis within the derivational timeline

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The crucial contrast is between

Likewise, ellipsis of a potential target creates a new adjacency relation, and with it a new target for RF:

Thus, RF in this variety does not apply vacuously to the elided nominal; rather, it “waits” until after ellipsis has taken place. Overall, whether we elide an RF trigger or an RF target, this sandhi phenomenon always follows ellipsis. This follows straightforwardly if ellipsis is triggered during the derivation, but not if it is strictly postsyntactic: some ad-hoc ordering statement would be required. In the talk, I will present additional data from a southern Italian variety in which RF is highly constrained by syntactic structure (and thus “earlier” in the postsyntax), and in which the same result holds.

Further evidence comes from tone sandhi in Taiwanese (Chen 2000). Roughly, if a syllable bearing a lexical tone is in non-XP-final position, it undergoes a predictable tonal alternation. Since ellipsis can create new surface XP-final positions, we expect to see non-application of sandhi adjacent to such an ellipsis site, which is confirmed (sandhi syllables appear in bold):

The crucial contrast is between $u$ ‘PERF’ in (6a) vs. (6b): in the former, $u$ is in a non-XP-final position, and thus undergoes sandhi; in the latter, $u$ finds itself in an XP-final position, and thus must appear with its lexical tone. This is clear evidence that ellipsis precedes tone sandhi (and the above facts replicate with e.g. nominal ellipsis in the language). In the talk, I present evidence that such tone sandhi is in fact a case of allomorphy (an “early” postsyntactic process), strengthening the case for ellipsis as a narrow-syntactic operation, and not a strictly PF phenomenon.