

CHAPTER 6. CROSS-LINGUISTIC ISSUES AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Having examined the basic types of null arguments in English, posited grammatical representations and explored the discourse effects of these forms, I conclude here by returning to the issue of null arguments cross-linguistically, considering how what we now know about English null arguments might affect our generalizations.

6.1. SOME CROSS-LINGUISTIC COMPARISONS

The first matter that we might address is the extent to which the null argument phenomena of English is or is not unique to that language, and how it might, therefore, influence the categorization of languages.

6.1.1. Null Subjects

In Chapter 2 we saw that conversational English has null subjects which in some cases result from phonological deletion of initial material but in others are best analyzed as zero pronominals. These null subjects appear to be more limited in terms of register and discourse constraints than most of the more commonly discussed zero pronominal languages. However, it may be that there are other languages that are similar to English with respect to one or the other of these limitations.

One such language is Yiddish, whose properties I have already discussed in Chapter 1. Like English, null subjects in Yiddish are mostly limited to conversational language, clause-initial position (except ambient es), and main clauses. As was shown in Prince (1994), these Yiddish null subjects are, like English, not limited in type (i.e., they are not limited to sentences with particular agreement features). They also appear to be found in positions that suggest an analysis other than phonological deletion, as shown in the example from Chapter 1 repeated below as (1):

(1). Take, meynst mist an emes?

 “Indeed, (you) really mean it?” (Prince 1994:4)

Yiddish differs from English in three clear respects. First, in addition to examples like (1), Yiddish has a separate phenomenon which appears to be a more robust version of the German null es. This additional phenomenon can be put aside as orthogonal to our comparison.

The second noticeable difference between the two languages is in the breakdown of null subjects. Aside from the null expletives common in both languages, first person singular subjects are the most common in English but second person subjects are the most common in Yiddish. The third difference is related -- null subjects in English have different discourse constraints from those in Yiddish and these constraints are not dependent on the type of subject. (Again, see Chapter 1 for a discussion of Prince's analysis of Yiddish null subjects.)

It seems, therefore that we can characterize Yiddish as having the same register and grammatical constraints as English (except for ambient es), and different semantic and discourse constraints. This suggests that, in answer to one of the questions raised in Chapter 1, we can not draw absolute ties between grammatical forms of null subjects and discourse uses.

Another, non-Germanic, language that apparently shares at least some of the null subject characteristics of English is French. Anne Abeillé (private communication) has told me that

conversational French allows null subjects. Specifically, expletive il is often missing in constructions like those in (2).

- (2).
- a. (II) Faut Pas pousser.
“It's not necessary to shove.” or “You don't have to shove.”
 - b. (II) y'a pas a dire.
“There's nothing to say.”
 - c. (II) y'en a marre
“I've had enough of it.” (slang)

It appears then that, though the phenomenon may be more restricted in French (further study is warranted), conversational null subjects are not unique to either English or Germanic languages. It would also be interesting to see whether the discourse constraints on the French null subjects is at all like that for English or Yiddish null subjects or if it has a third discourse pattern of its own.

Finally, unlike conversational null subjects, imperative null subjects are apparently not at all uncommon in form or usage. Sadock and Zwicky (1985) report that in their cross-linguistic survey, the ‘suppression’ of the subject in imperatives was quite popular. In fact, all but one language in their survey (Onandoga) apparently left out either some subjects or some concord marking on the verb. In this case, we have a use of null subjects that seems to be tied very strongly to discourse function. Ultimately, the important question here will be whether the commonness of this phenomenon is tied to the nature of imperatives per se or whether it is linked to the inherently straightforward interpretation of these null subjects.

6.1.2. Null Objects

In Chapter 3, we saw that null objects in English are, unlike null objects in non-configurational languages or discourse-oriented languages, strongly tied to lexical or other conceptual restrictions. One of these types, arbitrary null objects, has already been shown to exist and behave similarly in both one pro-drop language (Italian), and one non-pro-drop language (French). Other languages also appear to have restricted uses of null objects, though it remains to be seen how closely matched the lexical/conceptual constraints are.

Spanish, for instance apparently allows null objects without verbal clitics in certain constructions, like (3) and (4) below.

- (3). Tengo chocolate. ¿Quieres?
have-1sg chocolate want-2sg
“(I) have some chocolate. Do (you) want (some)?”
- (4). Juan necesitaba nafta. Pro eso traje.
Juan needed-3sg gas for that brought-1sg
“Juan needed gas. So (I) brought (some).”

Based on the judgments of my informants,¹ these null objects seem to be dependent on the interpretation of the null subject rather than on particular verbs, specifically on the object being an unspecified quantity or number. In fact, though null arguments are more common in Spanish than in English, there are some lexically-defined examples in English whose Spanish counterparts are apparently ungrammatical, as in (5)².

¹Thanks to Enric Vallduví, Josep Fontana, and Rob Stainton for soliciting judgments on these examples from family and friends.

²Some speakers apparently get this sentence as long as it was not “Karina” who was called.

- (5). Karina no esta enferma. *(Yo) he llamado por teléfono. Está bien.
“Karen isn't sick. I called. She's fine.”

Interestingly, the Spanish examples do look somewhat similar to the ‘yinglish’ constructions discussed in Chapter 4, and illustrated in (6).³

- (6). Don't worry about the coffee. I'll bring.

Yinglish, however, has at least one other type, as in (7), and it would be interesting to find out how far the parallel with Spanish goes.

- (7). [the phone rings] I should answer?

In a final note on Spanish, Enric Vallduví has informed me (private communication) that Basque-country Spanish seems to have different or additional constraints, the grammaticality of a null object being directly affected by the tense of the verb. Clearly, there is wide variation in the use of constrained null objects, not just between languages, but even between dialects.

Finally, given that lexical conceptual structures have been crucial to the representation of null objects in English, we should consider some possible additional, cross-linguistic, uses of these structures. Having determined that lexical-conceptual information effects the ranking of discourse entities in English, we now also have a more elegant environment for including other ‘conceptual’ information about the discourse, perhaps varying the information available in these structures with the type of language. In discourse-oriented languages for instance, these structures may include so-called pragmatic information like topic and empathy, since they are features of particular lexical items.

We might also see whether the lexical conceptual elements used to define English null objects can't be extended to replace cross-linguistic analyses that have relied on grammatical functions, such as

³Thanks to Ellen Prince for some tokens and to both Ellen and Gregory Ward for passing on to me some of their email discussions on this subject.

Simpson and Bresnan (1983)'s analysis of the complex obviation system for the non-configurational language, Warlpiri.

6.2. INTERPRETABILITY

In Chapter 1, I argued that there is a rich diversity in null arguments cross-linguistically, and proposed that the one universal constraint on null arguments is that they must be INTERPRETABLE, and that this constraint could be satisfied in a number of different ways. An examination of English null subjects has shown us some other features that may satisfy interpretability.

Specifically, we have noted how some null subjects in conversational English are underspecified for certain agreement features (eg., sing/plur). I argued that in these cases, the ambiguity associated with these unspecified features is simply a by-product of the speaker's intentions. If the speaker is not concerned with identifying these features, the hearer may fully interpret all of what the speaker intended to communicate without assigning values for these features to the null subject. In other words, an underspecified null pronoun is, in principle, still interpretable. However, the intentional structure of the discourse constrains when they may occur.

This aspect of interpretability is compatible with the Gricean maxim of quantity; even overt pronouns may be underspecified in certain ways. For example, the use of we in the following utterance could mean “my family”, or just “my spouse and I”. The distinction is simply not crucial to the speaker, and a listing of the included members therefore would be non-cooperative.

(8). The old mini-van finally died, so we got a new station wagon last week.

The second new interpretability feature that we have discussed in this thesis is lexical. Null objects in English have been shown to be constrained by choice of verb, both in terms of availability and in terms of how they are interpreted. IOA verbs, for example, require that the null object establish a new

discourse entity (though it may ultimately be shown to be identical to an already existing one). Hence, verbs like eat assign partial interpretations to their null objects directly.

We now have a revised list of interpretability factors that looks like this:

(9). **Means for Achieving Interpretability of Null Pronouns (expanded)**

- i. Recoverable from grammatical features in sentence
- ii. Recoverable from discourse/situational context
- iii. Recoverable because of limited feature variation in null pronouns
- iv. Arbitrary in reference
- v. Expletive
- vi. Identification of exact referent of subject unnecessary
- vii. Recoverable from lexical constraints

As with the original list, these seven possibilities are not intended to be exhaustive. There are almost certainly others to be found in the possible continuum of null argument uses in other languages; there may even be others relevant to English that we have yet to discover.

6.3. FUTURE WORK ON ENGLISH

The opportunities for future work on null arguments in English and on their relationship to null arguments in other languages are many. Some of these have already been suggested at various points in this thesis but there are a couple more that I would like to mention here.

6.3.1. Conversational English

There still remains the issue of why null subject sentences occur primarily in conversational English and not in 'formal' English. I intentionally use the term 'formal' rather than 'standard' because it is hard to classify a phenomenon that is widely used in everyday conversation with a well-defined function as non-standard. In fact, though I feel that there are some beneficial uses for the abstract idea of a standard language, I suspect that we are hard-pressed to find any data source which can be shown independently to consist of all and only standard language, and that we are equally unlikely to be able to trust that our own educated judgments about standard language are not indissoluble from our personal experiences and our common exposure to the influence of grammar teachers throughout our childhoods.

Certainly it has been my observation that, beyond a certain level of markedness or complexity, it is not actually uncommon to find a room full of linguists, all of whom feel they have native competence in Standard English, debating the grammaticality of a construction. In addition, it is as easy to find 'chatty' written text that makes heavy use of null subjects as it is to find highly 'formal' spoken language that tends to shy away from them. (In fact, other than certain heavily technical contexts, such as legal contracts, etc..., it is hard to even define an environment in which such a level of formality could be assumed.) In other words, even the notion of 'formal' is obscure.

Nonetheless, we need to be able to characterize the usage pattern of constructions like null subject sentences in English. I suggested in Chapter 2 that this pattern may be related to the function of these null subjects.

Assuming this to be true, the highly reduced appearance of null subjects in written English could be tied to the existence of another mechanism for achieving the same results. The most obvious choice in written language is visual structure, particularly paragraph breaks (cf. Gutwinski (1976), Hoffman (1989)).

6.3.2. Historical Comparisons

English null arguments apparently contrast not only with those in many other languages but also with those found in earlier forms of English. Cathy Ball (private communication) has pointed out to me that the 15th century English exemplified in the ‘Cely letters’ allowed both null subjects and objects in what she called an ‘as-for-zero’ construction, and it seems, only in this construction.⁴ I give some of the examples she observed below in (10)-(12).

(10). [1478 -- Robert Cely in Cely Letters]

And as for Rycharde Twge

0 ys notte corttes yn ys dellynge, for ...

“And as for Richard Twege, [he] is not courteous in his dealing,
because ...”

(11). [1480 -- Richard Cely in Cely Letters]

And the Kyng has comandyd my Lord Rewars ... to go to the Towyr ...

and as or hors, my Loorde Reuerys sendys dayly abhowte to inqweyr for 0.

'And the King has commanded my Lord Rivers ... to go to the Tower ... and
as for hors(es?), my Lord Rivers sends daily about to inquire for.'

(12). [1482 -- William Cely in Cely Letters]

Syr, as ffor all yowre thynggys here doyth well, but as ffor the wull fflete
off London, ys nott common yett.

'Sir, as for all your things here do well, but as for the wool
fleet from London, has not yet arrived.'

⁴The Celys were a family of wool merchants in the late 15th century who communicated through business letters. Punctuation in these letters has been added by the editors.

These seem *not* to be examples of telegraphic register since they occur only in this special construction, but whether they are borrowings from another language, evidence of a stronger discourse-orientation in English at a certain point in history, or something else entirely is an open issue. Resolution of this issue and a study of how this construction left the English language could help to determine how discourse functions get tied to null arguments in general.

6.4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I began this thesis by suggesting that what is not said can be as interesting as what is said. Hopefully, however, this thesis has been of some interest for what it *has* said.

In particular, I have tried to shed some light on the grammatical nature of both null subjects and null objects in English, and to characterize the discourse properties of these constructions. Using this information, I have made some suggestions about how discourse models can be adapted to successfully incorporate English null argument data.

Null arguments are a rich resource for natural languages and, though there is something to be gained from grouping together languages based on how similarly they use this resource, I believe there is also something to be gained from looking at the bigger picture. The fact that English is not one of the most prominent users of null arguments only makes it more interesting in the broader context. My final goal here has been to offer a first attempt at explaining how the curves and edges of the English phenomena might affect this picture.