ABSTRACT

GRAMMATICAL AND DISCOURSE PROPERTIES OF

NULL ARGUMENTS IN ENGLISH

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This study is concerned with the nature and use of null subjects and objects in English and with how these null arguments compare with those in other languages. Based on broad idiosyncratic cross-linguistic variation, it is proposed that, in general, the only absolute constraint on null arguments is *interpretability.*

For English, evidence is presented that argues against the theory that there are no zero pronominal subjects, only apparent cases resulting from the operation deleting initial, de-stressed material. Using a corpus of conversational data, it is also shown that null subjects exhibit a highly significant tendency to occur at three types of boundaries in discourse: turn boundaries, discourse segment boundaries, and discourse package boundaries. Previous proposals concerning the discourse functions of null subjects are shown to be problematic, and it is suggested that the intuitions underlying them may be explained indirectly. Null subject utterances are also compared with other superficially similar forms. For null objects, six different types are considered. For all but generic null objects, evidence indicates that they must be present in the grammar but only at the lexical level. For arbitrary null objects, apparent binding principle parallels between English and other languages are shown to result from discourse constraints. In general, it is demonstrated that a lexical representation based on conceptual structures readily handles the characteristics of implicit objects in English. Examining discourse properties, it is proposed that null objects must be consistent with the underlying context and intentional structure of the discourse at the time of utterance.

Apparent stereotype constraints are actually contextual constraints combined with conversational maxims. Additional constraints apply to specific verb types, subject to change across registers or dialects.

A revision is made to an existing model of local discourse structure (Centering) to make use of lexical conceptual information. This modification also handles some event references. The revision is related to the proposal that Centering should fit into a situation semantics and include situationally-present entities.

Finally, cross-linguistic issues are reconsidered and, based on the English study, two additional means for meeting the interpretability constraint are described.