

Null Subjects and Distinct Agreement in Modern Germanic

Understanding pro-drop

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Layout of the talk

- Background
- Null subjects in Modern Germanic
- Distinct Agreement
- Distinct Agreement in classic NSLs – some observations

Background

- Null subjects typically occur in languages with "rich" verb agreement (except for Mandarin and such languages) – see Roberts & Holmberg (2010) and many others...
- What is "rich" agreement?
- Jaeggli & Safir (1989): only morphologically uniform languages allow null subjects.
- Vikner (1995), Rohrbacher (1999): property of the verbal paradigm – languages have "rich" or "poor" agreement. Inflection for Number and Person in certain tenses seems to equal "rich" agreement.

Background

- Cole (2009, 2010: cf. also Camacho 2013:112ff): null subjects are identified according to a principle of morphological maximality: only maximal agreement (i.e., as much agreement as is possible in any given language) allows for null subjects.

”Morphological maximality is defined as the maximum extent to which null subjects can be recovered by agreement in the language concerned. This is represented, for example, by gender, person and number in Tarifit, person and number in Spanish, person in Bengali but nil morphology in Chinese.” (Cole 2010:279)

Background

- So, also Cole (2009, 2010) claim that languages allow/disallow null subjects according to language-specific properties. Three types of languages:
 1. contextually weak languages without null subjects (such as Norwegian, English and Icelandic)
 2. contextually strong languages where null subjects occur in conjunction with maximal agreement (Spanish, Bengali, Irish etc.)
 3. contextually strong languages without agreement, such as Thai, Chinese, Japanese etc., where null subjects are allowed.

Null subjects in Modern Germanic (MG)

In none of the Modern Germanic standard languages are thematic null subjects allowed.

- (1) a. Her *(I) do not know. (English)
b. Henne känner *(jag) inte. (Swedish)
c. Sie kenne *(ich) nicht. (Standard German)
d. Ekki þekki *(ég) hana. (Icelandic)

Jaeggli & Safir (1989:33) and Rohrbacher (1999:251ff): thematic null subjects as such are incompatible with V2-word order.

But: referential null subjects do occur in a number of Modern Germanic vernaculars!

Null subjects in Modern Germanic (MG)

- (2) I glaub moang bisd wieda gsund. (Bavarian; Axel & Weiß 2011:36)
I think tomorrow are-2sg again healthy
'I think that **you** will be well again tomorrow'
- (3) ...wama bmaid hama. (Central Bavarian; Axel & Weiß 2011:34)
because-1pl thought have-1pl
'because **we** have been thinking'
- (4) Ha der das nöd scho verzellt? (Zürich German; Cooper & Engdahl 1989:33)
have-1sg to-you it not already told
'Haven't **I** told you that already?'
- (5) Vielleicht merksch plötzlich nix mee. (Swabian; Bohnacker 2013:10)
maybe notice-2SG suddenly nothing more
'Maybe **you** suddenly will not feel anything anymore.'

Null subjects in Modern Germanic (MG)

- (6) Ik tink datst my helpe moatst. (West Frisian; de Haan 1994:81)
I think that-2sg me help must-2sg
'I think that **you** must help me'
- (7) Trink nit di kave, vorem vest nit kenen slofn. (Yiddish; Jacobs 2005:261)
drink not the coffee because get-2sg not no sleep
'Don't drink the coffee, because **you** won't be able to sleep'
- (8) An wet byddjum i Övdalim. (Övdalian; Rosenkvist 2010, 2011)
he knows live-1pl in Älvdalen
'He knows that **we** live in Älvdalen'

MG only allows:

- partial null subjects
- null subjects in 1p and 2p.

Crucial factor: verb agreement.

Null subjects in Modern Germanic

Verb forms in **bold** allow null subjects.

number	person	Bavarian	Central Bavarian	Zürich German	Swabian	West Frisian	Yiddish	Övdalian
singular	1	kumm	kumm	chume	komm	kom	kum	
	2	kummst	kummst	chunnsch	kommsch	komst	kumst	kumb
	3	kummt	kummt	chunnt	kommt	komt	kumt	
plural	1	kumman	kumma/ kumman				kumn	kumum
	2	kummts	kummts	chömed	kommet	komme	kumt	kumið
	3	kumman	kumman					
infinitive		kemma	kemma	chu	komma	kommen	kumn	kumå
null subjects		2sg, 2pl.	2sg, 1pl, 2pl	1sg, 2sg	1sg, 2sg	2sg	2sg	1pl, 2pl

Null subjects in Modern Germanic

Why are 3p null subjects disallowed? The 3sg verb forms seem to be unique and "rich" (specified for number/person), except in Yiddish and Övdalian.

number	person	Bavarian	Central Bavarian	Zürich German	Swabian	West Frisian	Yiddish	Övdalian
singular	1	kumm	kumm	chume	komm	kom	kum	
	2	kummst	kummst	chunnsch	kommsch	komst	kumst	kumb
	3	kummt	kummt	chunnt	kommt	komt	kumt	
plural	1	kumman	kumma/ kumman				kumn	kumum
	2	kummts	kummts	chömed	kommet	komme	kumt	kumið
	3	kumman	kumman				kumn	kumå
infinitive		kemma	kemma	chu	komma	kommen		
null subjects		2sg, 2pl.	2sg, 1pl, 2pl	1sg, 2sg	1sg, 2sg	2sg	2sg	1pl, 2pl

Distinct Agreement

Cole (2010) and Sigurðsson (2011) claim that 3p null subjects always need to be successfully linked to an antecedent, regardless of the “richness” of agreement, while 1p and 2p pronouns need no such antecedent, being Speech Act Pronouns.

”The fact that first and second person entities are seen as more salient, and thus more accessible in a language, than third person ones could explain various other phenomena relating to thematic null subjects that have represented puzzles in the past.” (Cole 2010:301)

”Since 1st and 2nd person are inherently C/edge-linked, this simply says that Italian \emptyset -T ϕ must either be a 1st or 2nd person pronoun or be a C/edge-linked (A-Top-linked) 3rd person pronoun, which is precisely the claim made by Frascarelli (2007).” (Sigurðsson 2011:283)

”Data show that 1st and 2nd person arguments in the T-domain do not need matching with an overt A-Topic to be interpreted.” (Frascarelli 2014:6)

Distinct Agreement

But which status have the notions of "Speech Act Participant", "inherent C-edge linking" and "salient in discourse"? Can we do without such extra-morphological devices?



Yes we can!
(Obama 2008)

(at least in MG... I think)

Roberts (2010:59): "We can think of identification as a process whereby the values of the *pro*'s features are assigned." So: the values and features of *pro* are significant!

Assumptions:

- (verb) agreement identifies/recovers null subjects
- underspecified agreement (stem forms) cannot identify null subjects
- (null) subject pronouns have various ϕ -feature setups
- the ϕ -features of AGR and the ϕ -features of the pronoun must match for successful identification.

Distinct Agreement

Problematic *pro* in Arabic?

"In Arabic, morphological maximality is represented by person, number and gender. This creates a slight problem since, in this language, gender is only morphologically recovered in the second and third person singular and plural. The concept therefore needs some modification to allow null subjects to occur in the 1st person singular and plural without agreement for that person being specified for gender." (Cole 2009:579)

Why should Arabic verb forms be marked for gender in 1p in order to identify 1sg and 1pl null subjects?

ana ('I') – singular, 1st person (no gender!)

nahnu ('we') – plural, 1st person (no gender!)

Gender agreement is superfluous if the (null) pronoun to be identified/recovered has no ϕ -feature for gender.

Distinct Agreement

A definition:

Agreement is distinct iff

- a. a specific agreeing (verb) form (F_a) and a (null) pronoun (P) express the same set of ϕ -features (number, person, gender)
- b. F_a and P have the same values for ϕ (singular/plural, 1/2/3, masc/fem/neut)
- c. only F_a matches the values for P (no syncretisms; for verbs, the infinitive form is included in the calculation).

Distinct Agreement

Feature correlation tables:

- the ϕ -features that are expressed by (verb) agreement are illustrated by shading
- pronouns are inserted according to their ϕ -feature status
- overlaps are marked with red. Prediction: only red pronouns can be null in MG.

Feature correlation in Bavarian			
pronoun	number	person	gender
1sg		ii	
2sg		du	
3sg.masc.			ea
3sg.fem.			sie
3sg.neut			es
1pl		mia	
2pl		ees	
3pl		se	

Feature correlation in Central Bavarian			
pronoun	number	person	gender
1sg		ii	
2sg		du	
3sg.masc.			ea
3sg.fem.			sie
3sg.neut			es
1pl		mia	
2pl		ees	
3pl		se	

Distinct Agreement

DA also applies in Yiddish and Övdalian (as well as in Frisian etc.).

Feature correlation in Yiddish			
pronoun	number	person	gender
1sg		ix	
2sg		du	
3sg.masc.			er
3sg.fem.			zi
3sg.neut			es
1pl		mir	
2pl		ir	
3pl		zej	

Feature correlation in Övdalian			
pronoun	number	person	gender
1sg		ig	
2sg		du	
3sg.masc.			an
3sg.fem.			ø
3sg.neut			eð
1pl		wjr	
2pl		ið	
3pl		dier	

Distinct Agreement

In Zürich German and Swabian, 1st null subjects seem to be null clitics (Cooper 1995, Werner 1999, Haag-Merz 1996, Bohnacker 2013, Rosenkvist in progress). The pronoun (*i/e*) appears to be deleted in clitic position (cluster) due to a post-syntactic phonetic process. However, agreement for 1sg is still distinct (at least in ZG). 3sg clitics may also be very weak, but cannot be omitted.

Conclusion: DA is a *necessary* condition for null subjects in MG and overrides phonetics.

Feature correlation in Zürich German			
pronoun	number	person	gender
1sg		ich/ i / e	
2sg		du	
3sg.masc.			er
3sg.fem.			si
3sg.neut			es
1pl		mir	
2pl		ir	
3pl		si	

Feature correlation in Swabian			
pronoun	number	person	gender
1sg		ich/ e	
2sg		du	
3sg.masc.			är
3sg.fem.			sui
3sg.neut			es
1pl		mir	
2pl		ir	
3pl		se	

Distinct Agreement

So what about agreeing complementizers?

language variety	null subjects	agreeing complementizer	distinct agreement
Bavarian	+	+	+
Lower Bavarian	+	+	+
Zürich German	+	-	+
Swabian	+	-	+
Frisian	+	+	+
North Frisian	+	-	+

Agreeing complementizers are not found in Allemannic, North Frisian (disappeared recently), Yiddish or Övdalian, and cannot be necessary for null subjects to develop or occur in MG.

However, agreeing complementizers may provide DA and thus participate in identifying/recovering null subjects. Cf: Zwart (1993, 1997), Weiß (2005), Fuß (2005:94ff), Axel & Weiß (2010, 2011), and de Haan (1994, 2010:chapter 10).

“This means that complementiser agreement is unlikely to be a universal prerequisite [in Germanic OV-vernaculars – my remark] for pro-drop.”
Bohnacker (2013:268)

Distinct Agreement

So how are null subjects in embedded clauses derived in MG?

language variety	type	null subjects	agreeing comp.	verb raising	few emb. NS
Bavarian	OV	+	+	-	-
Lower Bavarian		+	+	-	-
Zürich German		+	-	-	+
Swabian		+	-	-	+
Frisian		+	+	-	-
North Frisian		+	-	-	+
Yiddish	VO	+	-	+	-
Övdalian		+	-	+	-

AGR in C: OK!
 V-to-T: OK!
 Neither: ?

Distinct Agreement

The notion of DA infers that:

- “rich” or “maximal” agreement is not a property of individual languages, but a type of morphosyntactic interaction between specific agreeing forms and (null) pronouns.
- concepts such as “Speech Act Participant” and “salient in discourse” may not be necessary for the understanding of null subjects in some languages (e.g. Arabic). Before asserting a non-morphosyntactic asymmetry between 1/2 and 3 person subjects, DA may be considered.
- gender marked (null) pronouns in classic NSLs may require support from the discourse context in order to be properly interpreted/reconstructed (which may explain some of their syntactic properties).

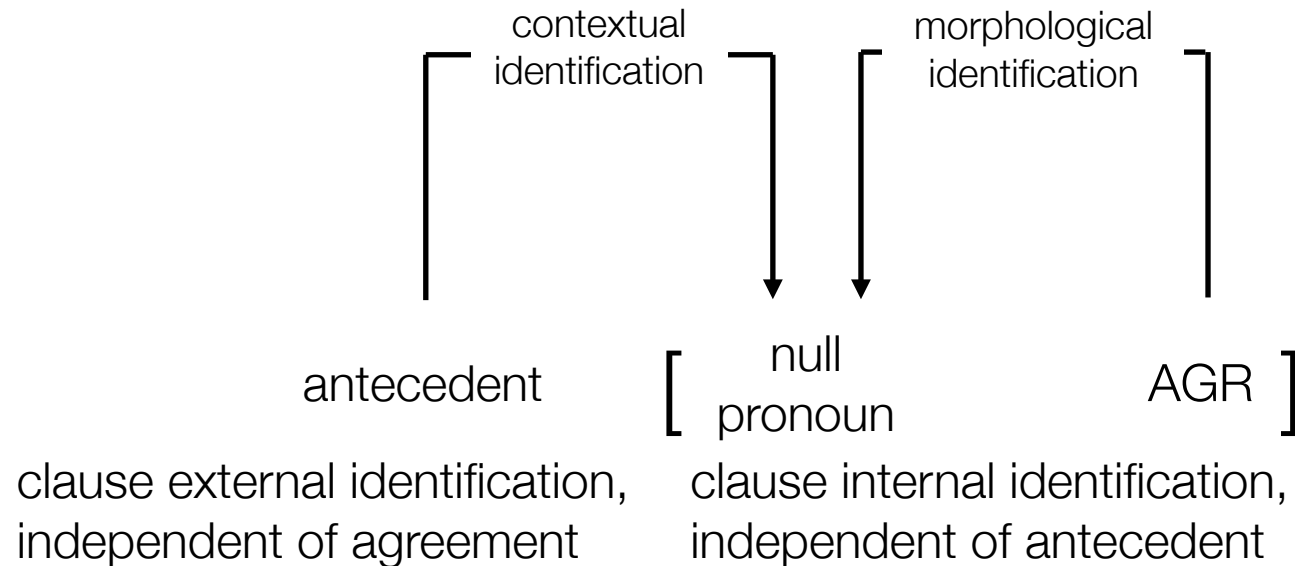
Distinct Agreement

Clause internal and clause external identification:

”One of the theses argued for in this chapter is that there are two ways to derive null subjects: one is by means of incorporation of a subject pronoun in T. In this case the null subject is a deleted copy in a chain headed by T. Definite null subjects can be derived in this way in consistent NSLs only. The other is by deletion of a pronoun in SpecTP, subject to control from a higher clause. This is the only way that definite null subjects can be derived in partial NSLs. (Holmberg 2010:89)

Frascarelli (2007), Cole (2009, 2011), Sigurðsson (2011) and Camacho (2013) all suggest that null subjects may be identified via an antecedent/reference chain in discourse or by morphology.

Distinct Agreement



Contra Holmberg (2010), it appears that partial null subjects in MG only require clause internal morphological identification – but more research is needed concerning null subjects in embedded contexts etc.

Distinct Agreement in classic NSLs

Distinct Agreement may be operable also in classic NSLs.

Feature correlation in Spanish (Castilian)			
pronoun	number	person	gender
1sg		yo	
2sg		tú	
3sg.masc.			él
3sg.fem.			ella
3sg.neut.			ello
1pl.masc.			nosotros
1pl.fem.			nosotras
2pl.masc.			vosotros
2pl.fem.			vosotras
3pl.masc.			ellos
3pl.fem.			ellas

Prediction: all null subjects in Spanish require antecedent/reference chain, except for null *yo* and null *tú*. Cf. Frascarelli (2007) for Italian 3sg null subjects (and subsequent works).

Distinct Agreement in classic NSLs

There are substantial differences between Spanish and Italian.

Feature correlation in Italian			
pronoun	number	person	gender
1sg		io	
2sg		tu	
3sg.masc.			lui
3sg.fem.			lei
1pl		noi	
2pl		voi	
3pl		loro	

Prediction: only null 3sg subjects require antecedent/reference chain in (standard) Italian (as noted by Frascarelli 2007).

But what about *loro*? Does null *loro* behave like null *lui/lei*?

Conclusion

Clearly, more work has to be done on null subjects in Modern Germanic – and elsewhere!

Thanks for listening!

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