

PA7.2 – Null Subjects Typologically

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I. The form-meaning mismatch

- Null subjects (NSs) and more generally null arguments (NAs), are a case of a 0:1 mismatch between form and meaning.
(1) *pro*/mɛ kʰɛnɐ pʌkɐ rʌh-e hũ (Hindi)
pro/1sg food cook stay-SG.M be.1sg
'I am cooking food.'
- NSs are claimed to be licensed i) syntactically (Italian, Greek, Spanish, etc.) by rich verbal agreement, or ii) pragma-semantically (Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, etc.) – in the latter case, all arguments may be null [1],[2].
- Problem: the division of labour is not so clean – In Italian, NSs require specific kinds of discourse antecedents [3], and in Mandarin, licensing of NAs shows sensitivity to particular syntactic locality constraints [4].

Research questions

- Are NSs in so-called 'canonical NS languages' licensed differently from NAs in 'radical/discourse NA languages'?
- Are NAs null morphemes, or are they the result of deletion or non-spell-out of regular pronouns?

Empirical questions

- Synchronically, how strong is the correlation between the richness and structure of a language's subject agreement paradigm and the availability of NSs?
- How strong is the correlation diachronically? Does the development or loss of rich subject agreement track the emergence or loss of NSs?

II. Methodology and hypotheses

- Method
 - A typology of the properties of NAs will be developed based on a sample of 25 to 30 languages from different language families.
 - For a selection of four or five languages, the historical emergence or loss of NAs will also be investigated.
- Hypotheses
 - If NSs are a type of NA, NSs in canonical NS languages should behave similarly to NSs in radical NA languages.
 - Synchronically and diachronically, rich subject agreement is expected to not be a sufficient condition for NS licensing, though it may be a necessary one.

III. Expected results and discussion

- If both canonical-type NSs and radical-type NAs are syntactically and semantically restricted in their distribution, they should be analysed as belonging to a language's nominal paradigm along with pronouns, reflexives, and R-expressions.
- In languages where nominals can have different internal structures, NAs may also have distinct internal structures though their specific structure may vary cross-linguistically.
- Interlanguage variation also arises because of
 - the interaction of different licensing conditions (such as richness or independence of agreement);
 - independent properties of the syntax of arguments in a given languages (such as obligatory movement of some arguments to an A' position [3]).
- Intralinguage variation, i.e. apparent optionality of NAs in some contexts (as in Hindi in (1)), arises because both overt and null arguments can be independently syntactically and semantically licensed.

IV. Consequences and follow-up questions

- Like many spoken languages, most sign languages can use NSs in specific contexts such as verb agreement, but also, in role shift, some body-anchored plain (i.e. non-agreeing) verbs (and in imperative-like declaratives).
- The third PhD project of this project area (PA7.3) will evaluate analyses of subject drop and topic drop in sign languages to check whether the contexts described above are clear contexts of licensing NSs.
- In addition, the project will empirically verify the conditions of null subjects in German Sign Language (DGS).
- Data from the Hamburg DGS corpus [5] will be used and complemented with further empirical studies.
- The project will explore how modality-specific properties such as the body as subject [6] and the body as actor [7] can be formally integrated into cross-linguistic theories of NS licensing.
- Ultimately, it aims to develop a model that accounts for both modality-independent universal and modality-specific aspects of subject drop.