Conditions on null arguments in Old Norwegian

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The early Germanic languages Old Icelandic, Old Swedish, Old High German, Old English and Old Saxon have been characterized as partial null-subject languages (Walkden, 2012). In this talk I will introduce the lesser studied variety Old Norwegian (ca. 750–1350) into the discussion of early Germanic null arguments. I will argue that the licensing mechanism proposed in Walkden (2012) cannot account for all Old Norwegian null arguments, and propose a revised analysis.

Walkden (2012, 216–228), adopting Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl's (2007) model of the left periphery, suggests that null arguments in early Germanic can only be licensed by an Aboutness topic operator in ShiftP. Walkden's work makes the following predictions, which I will test against data from *The Legendary Saga of St. Óláfr* and *The Old Norwegian Homily Book*:[1] Referential null subjects are (i) aboutness topics, (ii) mostly 3rd person, and (iii) more common in main clauses than in subordinate clauses.

I will show that the prediction about clause type is borne out with significant results in *The Legendary Saga of St. Óláfr*, but not in the sample from *The Old Norwegian Homily Book*. The prediction about person features is borne out; in the investigated data, 1st and 2nd person null pronouns are hardly present at all. I will suggest, however, that this has a different explanation from the one proposed by Walkden (2012): While Walkden (2012, 219) suggests that 1st and 2nd person null pronouns are disfavoured because they are rarely aboutness topics in the preserved text types, I will argue that the asymmetry is rather due to the deictic nature of the 1st and 2nd persons (Faarlund, 2013).

The prediction about topicality is not borne out, since Old Norwegian exhibits some null arguments that can hardly be aboutness topics. In the relative clause in (1a), the subject is null, though a non-subject is relativized; this is unexpected on the assumption that relativized constituents are aboutness topics (Lambrecht, 1994, 130). In the second main clause in (1b), there are *two* null arguments, of which both cannot be aboutness topics, since there can only be one aboutness topic per clause (Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl, 2007, 114).

(1)   a. *Oc þotte farunautum Olafs harallz sonar æigi auðvællt undan*
        and seemed companions.DAT Óláfr's Haraldr's son not easy away

        at styra þaðan sem pro *komner varo.*
        to steer from.there COMP [they] come were

        'To the companions of Óláfr Haraldssonr, it did not seem easy to steer clear [of the enemy] from the position they were in.' (The legendary saga of St. Óláfr, 6831)

    b. *Siðan drogo þæir ut tunguna um kværkena.* |
        after.that pulled they out tongue:the through angle.below.the.chin:the |

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[1]The data are extracted from the Menotec corpus, http://www.edd.uio.no:3000.

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Skaro pro   pro *þar af*
cut   [they] [it] there off

'After that they pulled his tongue out through his throat. There they cut it off.'
(LSSÓ, 9822)

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In subordinate clauses, null arguments that are not aboutness topics could, potentially, be controlled by an antecedent in a higher clause, as proposed for e.g. Finnish (Holmberg and Sheehan, 2010). This would not account for main clauses like (1b), however, and furthermore, this type of control relation is not motivated in Old Norwegian, since null arguments in subordinate clauses do not necessarily have an antecedent in the matrix clause. Cf. (2):

(2)   *þat er fornt skip nokcot | se   hvesso gratt* pro *er oc   skamt.*
      that is old   ship some | see:IMP how   grey [it] is and short

      'That is an old ship. See how grey and short it is.' (LSSÓ, 8455)

To account for the data in (1), I will instead propose a revised analysis in which not only ShiftP, but also FamP, the projection designated for familiar topics in Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl's (2007) framework, can license null arguments. Familiar topics are, according to Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl (2007, 8–9), "given or accessible constituents, typically destressed and realized in a pronominal form"; this description seems to fit all null arguments that are not aboutness topics. The proposed analysis is rather unrestrictive from a syntactic point of view; I will suggest, however, that the actual distribution of null pronouns is limited by the accessibility of antecedents in the discourse (Cole, 2010), via Sigurðsson's (2011, 283–284) mechanism of clause-external context scanning. Clause-external context scanning is, according to Sigurðsson, the mechanism by which the reference of a null argument is decided. I will suggest that only referents with a very high degree of accessibility can be picked out as antecedents of null arguments. In Old Norwegian, *connectivity* between the clause containing the null subject and the clause containing its antecedent is of great importance as a factor promoting accessibility; thus null arguments are often found in e.g. coordinate clauses and verb-initial main clauses in narratives.

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