

Null Subjects and Distinct Agreement in Modern Germanic

The link between verb agreement and the possibility of null referential subjects was observed already in antiquity, as noted by Roberts & Holmberg (2010:3ff). In current research, several attempts have been made to specify the exact morphological properties of the verb inflection paradigm that allow for null subjects. For instance, Vikner (1995) and Rohrbacher (1999) suggest that the notion of "rich agreement" is related to agreement for person and number in certain combinations/tenses, while Cole (2010, 2011) instead proposes that "maximal agreement", i.e., as much agreement as is possible in the given language, is required for null subjects to occur.

However, I will argue that approaches that focus only on verb agreement are on the wrong track, partially – what is essential in the study of null subject languages is the ϕ -feature matching between on the one hand the personal pronouns, and on the other (verb) agreement.

The material for my argumentation will be some Modern Germanic vernaculars that allow partial null subjects: Bavarian, Zürich German, Swabian, Frisian, Yiddish and Övdalian. I will utilize previous studies such as e.g. Bayer (1984), Weiß (1998): Bavarian and Central Bavarian; Cooper (1994) and Werner (1999): Zürich German; Haag-Merz (1996) and Bohnacker (2013): Swabian; Hoekstra & Marác (1989), de Haan (1994), and Hoekstra (1997): Frisian; Levander (1909), Garbac (2010), and Rosenkvist (2010, 2011): Övdalian; Prince (1998), Geller (1999), and Jacobs (2005): Yiddish. Also results from fieldwork on Zürich German, Swabian, Frisian and Övdalian will be presented and discussed during the talk.

As for Modern Germanic, I argue that all instances of null subjects follow a principle of Distinct Agreement (DA), which can be formulated as in (1).

- (1) Null referential subjects can only be (morphologically/clause-internally) identified by Distinct Agreement (DA).

Agreement is Distinct iff

- a. a form AGR_a and a pronoun P_p express the same set of ϕ -features
- b. AGR_a and P_p have the same values for ϕ
- c. only AGR_a matches the values for P_p .

(1 a. and b.) states that the possible ϕ -features of P (number, person and gender) must be fully reflected by AGR, and (1 c.) prohibits syncretic AGR-forms. The feature correlations for e.g. Övdalian and Zürich German are illustrated in tables 1 and 2, where shaded cells indicate the featural strength of the inflected verb.

As for sg in Övdalian, we find that the finite verb only displays number agreement in singular (an example is *kumb* 'come' sg), while the relevant pronouns are specified for at least both number (sg) and person (1, 2 or 3). Consequently, singular pronouns cannot be null in Övdalian. However, both *wið* ('we') and *ið* ('you' 2pl) may occur as null subjects (in the table, these forms coincide with the shading that illustrates the featural setup of the finite verb; possible *pro*-forms are in capitals). In these cases, the finite verb agreement matches the featural strength of the personal pronouns, the verb being inflected for both number and person (the forms are *kumum* and *kumið*, respectively). 3pl cannot be null, however, since the verb form is non-distinct; as in several other Germanic languages, the form for 3pl is identical with the infinitive (in this case: *kumå*).

Övdalian φ -feature correlation				
	no/amb. features	number	person	gender
1sg			ig	
2sg			du	
3sg.m				an
3sg.f				ø
3sg.n				eð
1pl			WID	
2pl			ID	
3pl			dier	

Table 1. Feature correlation in Övdalian.

Zürich German φ -feature correlation				
	no/amb. features	number	person	gender
1sg			ICH/I	
2sg			DU	
3sg.m				er
3sg.f				si
3sg.n				es
1pl			mir	
2pl			ir	
3pl			si	

Table 2. Feature correlation in Zürich German.

In Zürich German, only 1sg and 2sg may appear as null subjects, and only in these cases do the φ -features of the verb forms match the φ -features of the personal pronouns.

No Modern Germanic vernacular allow 3p null subjects – in fact, there is a universal tendency that 1p and 2p pronouns more often occur as null subjects, which often is linked to the fact that they are Speech Act Participants. Sigurðsson (2011) argues that the difference between 1p/2p and 3p is encoded in syntax:

Since 1st and 2nd person are inherently C/edge-linked [...] (Sigurðsson 2011:283)

However, the principle of DA requires a complete feature matching between AGR and P, and for 3p-pronouns this is not possible in Germanic. 3p pronouns have a φ -feature for gender (masc., fem., or neut.) while Germanic verbs never inflect for gender. In table 2, it is shown that although there is a 3sg-verb form in Zürich German (*chunnt*), it fails to match the 3sg-pronouns completely: the gender feature cannot be recovered by the 3sg-verb form. DA thus rules out 3p null subjects in Germanic (and in several other languages) on purely morphological grounds. In this view, we do not need to encode the notion of Speech Act Participant in narrow syntax, contra e.g. Sigurðsson (2011), a result which I find to be theoretically desirable. Furthermore, in this perspective it is not unexpected that 3sg null subjects in e.g. Italian seem to require clause-external/non-morphological support (cf. Frascarelli 2007 and subsequent work) in order to be identified.

Having shown that DA predicts correctly the distribution of referential null subjects in Modern Germanic vernaculars (with the addition of a phonological condition for 1sg in Zürich German and Swabian), I will also discuss null subjects in embedded clauses with and without complementizer agreement (in Zürich German and Swabian, complementizers do not agree), and, briefly, how DA can be implemented also in Romance languages.