

On Definite Null Objects in English

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1. Introduction and main claims: The availability of definite-object drop in English is a fact largely neglected in theoretical analyses of null arguments, perhaps with the exception of null objects in some special registers (cf., e.g., (1) from the recipe register; cf., a.o., Haegeman 1987a,b; Massam and Roberge 1989). Even though it is uncontroversial that the neutral register of English is very restrictive as far as the omission of definite objects is concerned (cf. (2) from Goldberg 2001:508), it is not the case that the phenomenon is absent from the system altogether (cf. (3)):

- (1) To make the avocado bruschetta: halve the avocado; scoop the flesh into a bowl, along with the lime juice, then mash it/ \emptyset roughly, using a fork, and season it/ \emptyset to taste.
- (2) When it comes to tasty ducks, tigers love to kill them/* \emptyset .
- (3) Grandpa has just called us/ \emptyset .

In the present contribution, I will argue that the object position in cases such as (3) is occupied by a truncated pronoun, represented in the syntax as $n(P)$ and receiving null spell-out at SM, deriving the facts from components of grammar arguably available in UG. Furthermore, I will suggest that contexts such as (1) constitute an extension of the derivational options available in (3), making it unnecessary to resort to stipulating register-specific mechanisms to capture intralinguistic variation.

2. Data and analysis: In the stylistically-unmarked variety of English, definite-object drop has been observed to be lexically-constrained, with synonymous verbs differing with respect to making it possible (cf. Fillmore 1986). That null objects of verbs such as *call* and *visit* have to be interpreted as definite is suggested by the fact that it is odd to admit ignorance of the identity of the referent of the object (cf. Fillmore 1986 for a discussion of this definiteness test) and by the inability of the object to license sluicing (cf. AnderBois 2012):

- (4) #They called \emptyset ; I wonder whom they called.
- (5) #Grandma called \emptyset , and we're going to find out whom.

The interpretive properties of definite null objects of this type parallel the interpretive properties of overt pronouns (cf. Pedersen 2011).

I adopt the assumption that personal pronouns realise DPs in English (cf. Postal 1969; Ritter 1995, a.o.). For concreteness, I assume further that the structure of the pronouns contains also the Num head and that the lowest head in the projection of a pronoun is the nominalising head n , which contains gender (cf. Saab 2010). According to the English spell-out rules, pronouns in this language must realise the highest projection constituting the pronoun (cf. Neeleman and Szendrői 2007), that is DP on current assumptions (e.g. $[_{DP} D [_{NumP} Num_{SG} [_{nP} n_{FEM}]]] \rightarrow she$). To account for the definite-null-object data, I propose that, in this case, the object position is filled with a pronoun whose structure is truncated relative to the structure of the overt pronouns in English. If the spell-out rules for pronouns target DP, a truncated structure will not be realised as a pronoun.

I suggest that the structure of the null object contains only the nP layer, e.g.:

- (6) Grandma called $[_{nP} n]$.

The nominalising head n in English need not be associated with any phonological features (e.g. $[_{NumP} Num_{SG} [_{nP} n [\sqrt{HORSE}]]] \rightarrow horse$), hence the nP in (6) is null.

In analyses rejecting the idea that (referential) arguments are DPs in the languages which lack articles, and hence can be taken to lack D in the systems (cf., e.g., Willim 2000; Bošković 2012), the interpretation of nPs containing a bare noun is achieved with the application of type-shifting and Existential Closure (cf. Chierchia 1998). Tomioka (2003) argues that this is also what derives the interpretive properties of null arguments in Japanese. Following this strand of research, I suggest

here that the interpretation of definite null objects of verbs such as *call* is achieved by ι , that is the operation of type-shifting of a predicate to an individual, and is specified further at the C-I interface by matching with a contextually salient entity.

On Chierchia's (1998) assumptions, the availability of the definite article blocks the application of ι in English. I suggest that this is not the case in contexts such as (6) because whenever the object position is filled with *nP*, the lowest phase in the extended verbal projection (*v*P/VoiceP*) is treated as an articleless domain, making it possible for ι to apply as it does in regular articleless languages. I formalise this assumption by proposing that verbs such as *call* and *visit* are lexically marked with an *n*-feature, which results in the first phase in the verbal domain being treated as belonging to the NP-language system (as opposed to the DP-language systems). This explains why definite null objects are available only with some verbs in English, as it is only the verbs marked with the *n*-feature which make it possible for ι to apply to their objects. When DP is merged as the object of such verbs, the presence of D pre-empts the application of ι (cf. (3)). The unavailability of lexical bare nouns in this context can be shown to follow from the spell-out rules of English.

Pérez-Leroux et al. (2008, 2013) argue that the initial state of grammar consist of a null bare noun, available to be merged as the object and interpreted either as definite or indefinite. Their acquisitional findings tie in with the present proposal on the assumption that ι is given in UG and its availability gradually becomes restricted to the objects of verbs marked with the *n*-feature.

3. Extension of the analysis to special-register contexts: Assuming the parametric hierarchy (from macroparameters to nanoparameters) as proposed in Biberauer and Roberts (2012) and Roberts (2012), I suggest that the movement upward the hierarchy can be observed not only in diachronic data, but can also be taken to be responsible for register-driven intralinguistic variation. If the lexically-constrained definite-object drop in the neutral register of English can be considered as a case of a nanoparametric setting leading to a subset of transitive verbs bearing the *n*-feature, the recipe register (cf. (1)), among others, can be taken to make it possible for a less-marked, microparametric option to operate (i.e. all transitive verbs are marked with the *n*-feature).

On this proposal, the parametric setting in question, rather than concerning null arguments as such, can be reduced to the licensing of a noun phrase lacking the DP layer as a referential argument, making it possible for the analysis to be related to argument-realisation options available cross-linguistically. Furthermore, definite objects in the register-marked varieties are not a register-specific phenomenon, but result from an extension of a mechanism already available in English.

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