

Extending the typology of partial null argument languages

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Holmberg & Roberts (2010: 5–13) present three types of referential null argument language (NAL):

- *Consistent* NALs, which typically involve rich verbal agreement and in which subjects of all persons and all tenses can be unexpressed;
- *Radical* or ‘*discourse*’ NALs, in which agreement plays no role but arguments other than the subject can remain unexpressed;
- *Partial* NALs, in which arguments may only be null in certain persons and contexts.

Holmberg & Roberts take Finnish to be representative of the partial NALs, mentioning also Hebrew, Russian, Icelandic, Marathi, and Brazilian Portuguese (2010: 11; see also Holmberg, Nayudu & Sheehan 2009 and Holmberg 2010). In Finnish (and Hebrew and Marathi), only 1st and 2nd person arguments may be left null in any finite context; 3rd person arguments may only be null under very specific conditions that I will abstract away from in this paper.

The question then arises: what underlies this person split? In particular, do we predict the existence of ‘mirror image Finnish’, in which 3rd person arguments may be null but 1st and 2nd person arguments may not be? Vainikka & Levy (1999: 623) explicitly predict that such languages cannot exist: ‘it cannot be the case that only third person subject pronouns may be omitted, while first/second pronouns must be retained’. However, Walkden (2012: ch. 5; 2013) argues that the early Northwest Germanic languages instantiate this option, since the omission of 1st and 2nd person arguments in these languages is extremely rarely attested in corpora. Further potential examples include Shipibo (Camacho & Elías-Ulloa 2010), Old North Russian (Kwon 2009), and Tongan (Otsuka 2000: 60–65).

For Holmberg (2010), null subjects in partial NALs are phonetically null DPs bearing a [*u*D] feature. In Finnish, Hebrew and Marathi, this feature is checked for 1st and 2nd person null subjects by agreement with a speaker or addressee operator in the left periphery (local logophoric agent or patient, Λ_A or Λ_P , in the sense of Sigurðsson 2004: 227). Adopting a traditional approach to Agree in which the uninterpretable feature is the Probe and must find its Goal within its c-command domain, Walkden (2012: 217–220) expands on Holmberg’s analysis by suggesting that along with [*i*D] these operators may bear a probing feature, which allows the subject’s [*u*D] to be checked as a byproduct. The presence or absence of this probing feature is a (lexical) parameter: if Λ_A and Λ_P bear such a feature, null subjects are licensed in the 1st and 2nd persons; if an Aboutness topic operator bears such a feature (cf. Frascarelli 2007), null subjects are licensed in the 3rd person, and only rarely in the 1st and 2nd. This is because, as Sigurðsson (1993: 254) argues, while it is not impossible for first and second person arguments to be Aboutness topics, this type of topicality is not easily established in direct speech.

Assuming that Λ_A and Λ_P pattern together in either bearing a probing feature or not bearing it, this typology predicts two other possibilities. First, a language is predicted in which neither Λ_A/Λ_P nor the Aboutness operator can probe, and hence no subject may be null: English, French, and Bambara (Koopman 1992) are examples of this type. Secondly, a language is predicted in which both Λ_A/Λ_P and the Aboutness operator are able to probe. Following Barbosa (2013), I propose that radical NALs such as Mandarin Chinese instantiate exactly this possibility. Barbosa (2011, 2013) notes a number of similarities between radical and partial NALs: a) both permit null objects as well as subjects (cf. also Walkden 2012: 221); b) both permit overt subjects where null subjects would be obligatory in consistent NALs; c) both permit null generic inclusive subjects, unlike consistent NALs.

A remaining question for this type of analysis is: what causes the argument to be phonetically null in these languages? Holmberg (2010) has nothing to say about this beyond a mention of an ‘extended version of chain reduction’ (2010: 104). Barbosa (2011, 2013)

proposes that what unifies these languages is that they all independently permit bare NP arguments (cf. also Tomioka 2003). One typological feature setting the early Germanic languages apart from their modern descendants is precisely that modern Germanic languages have grammaticalized a definite and indefinite article, and these are obligatory in many contexts. By contrast, bare NP arguments are available in the early Germanic languages, though rare: see Sommerer (2011: 193–204, 226–232) for Old English, and Lander & Haegeman (2013: 9–13) for Old Norse. If the link between bare NP arguments and radical or partial null argument status holds, and if the grammars with and without bare NP arguments are viewed as competing during the early Germanic period, then we would expect texts with more robust/frequent bare NP arguments to also exhibit more robust/frequent null arguments. Preliminary research shows this expectation to be borne out: the Old English *Bede* contains more bare definite NPs than *Orosius*, which contains more than *Cura Pastoralis* or *Boethius* (Sommerer 2011: 229), and *Beowulf* contains more bare definite NPs than any of these. This mirrors the frequency of null subjects in these texts. We can thus tentatively conclude that evidence from early Germanic is consistent with the idea that the possibility of null arguments is linked to the availability of bare NPs cross-linguistically.

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