

Accounting for Dispreferred Null Subjects in Partial Null Subject Languages

Cagri Bilgin, University of Toronto
cagri.bilgin@mail.utoronto.ca, bilgin.cagri@live.com

There are three major types of languages (among others) with regards to null subjects: consistent null subject languages (CNSLs), partial null subject languages (PNSLs), and non-null subject languages (NNSLs). CNSLs, like Italian, permit null subjects (NSs) in almost all persons; PNSLs, like Finnish, typically permit 1st and 2nd person NSs, but not 3rd person NSs; while NNSLs, like English, usually do not permit any NSs (Roberts and Holmberg 2010). In the syntactic literature, most scholars of NSs (Barbosa 2009, Holmberg 2005, Vainikka and Levy, among others) note that in PNSLs, even in positions where NSs are permitted, overt forms are generally used instead (i.e. NSs are dispreferred). Nevertheless, the literature treats NSs in PNSLs the same as NSs in CNSLs. Thus, most scholars provide theories that can account for the possibility of NSs in PNSLs, but not their dispreference. I argue that NSs in PNSLs and CNSLs are not the same, and provide a diachronic account of this difference.

Based on the works of many scholars (Barbosa 2009, Barbosa et al. 2005, Duarte 2000, Holmberg 2005, Holmberg et al. 2009, Kato 1999, 2012, Rodrigues 2002, 2004, Vainikka and Levy 1999, among others) and a survey of several PNSLs I recently conducted, (1) displays the differences between NSs in CNSLs and PNSLs:

(1) Differences in Optional and Dispreferred NSs

	Optional NS (ONS)	Dispreferred NS (DNS)
a.	Typically occurs in CNSLs.	Typically occurs in PNSLs.
b.	The most common subject of the clause.	Not the most common subject of the clause (the overt form is).
c.	Its overt counterpart is typically used for non-argumental purposes.	Its overt counterpart is typically both the most common subject of the clause, and used for non-argumental purposes.
d.	Typically considered as part of the spoken language.	Typically considered archaic, literary and/or formal.
e.	Used for disambiguation in embedded clauses.	Although possible, usually not used for disambiguation in embedded clauses.

I explain the differences in (1) by proposing that NSs in PNSLs are not part of the true system of pronouns, but rather they are “frozen forms” that are vestiges of the older system of the pronoun sets in earlier versions of these languages. For example, Brazilian Portuguese (BP) is a PNSL, while European Portuguese (EP) is a CNSL. Although BP allows its first person pronoun to be omitted, it is overt 74% of the time in spoken BP contrary to its CNSL counterpart EP, in which the first person is overt only 35% of the time (Barbosa et al. 2005). I argue that such data clearly indicate that the null pronoun subjects in PNSLs are unproductive frozen forms of the language, not unlike the third person agreement suffix on verbs in English.

The contrast in (1e) serves as an excellent example of how the difference between a productive NS and a frozen NS is reflected in the syntax. In PNSLs, (like NNSLs, and unlike CNSLs) an overt embedded pronoun may or may not be co-indexed with the matrix subject. NSs in PNSLs can disambiguate such a sentence, as they can only be co-indexed with the matrix subject. Despite possessing this disambiguating tool, however, speakers of PNSLs use ambiguous overt pronouns and rely on context for interpretation.

Given the arguments above, NSs in CNSLs and PNSLs clearly belong to distinct categories, and they must be accounted for as such by any theory of NSs.

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