

Unifying null arguments on two levels

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Different types of null arguments are standardly distinguished on two levels: (i) cross-linguistically, and (ii) language-internally. I put forth an analysis that aims at giving a unified explanation of the phenomenon on both these levels.

The observation that there is a correlation with the richness of inflectional morphology (Taraldsen 1978, Rizzi 1982) has led to the hypothesis of a causal relation between rich agreement and the possibility for null subjects. This, in turn, has generally resulted in teasing apart pro-drop languages with and without agreement, and to treating null subjects in each language class as a distinct type of linguistic object.

But the differences between null subjects in rich agreement languages such as Spanish and in agreementless languages such as Japanese are scarce, which casts doubts on the validity of their ontological distinction (Duguine 2014). As a way to resolve this tension, I argue that instead of being characterized as a potential licenser for pro-drop, agreement/inflection should be viewed as a potential blocker. Appealing to Frampton's (2002) and Müller's (2006) analyses of poor agreement (in German-like languages) in terms of morphological impoverishment of φ -features, and adopting an ellipsis analysis of pro-drop (Oku 1998, Saito 2007, Takahashi 2008, Duguine 2014), I propose that an inflectional head with impoverished φ -features, because it does not have the same feature-values as its subject, blocks the ellipsis of the latter. In other words, pro-drop is in principle available in any language (which explains why we can find it in languages with and without agreement morphology), but in some of them, independent grammatical factors make it impossible.

The second part of the talk extends the unification of the types of null arguments on a different level.

It is generally assumed that there can exist different classes of null arguments in individual languages; this is the case of what have been labeled *pro* and (controlled) PRO (cf. a.o. Chomsky 1981). Without denying that they have different syntactico-semantic properties (PRO is obligatorily controlled, *pro* is referentially free), I argue in favor of a unified analysis, where their differing properties result from independent factors. Sundaresan (2014) argues that the properties of *pro* and PRO are independent from their nullness. Pursuing this line of analysis, I discuss the distribution of *pro* and PRO with respect to overt subjects and clausal finiteness. I bring into discussion evidence from Basque, which displays a wide variety of non-finite constructions (Artiagoitia 2003) and dialectal variation in the interpretation of overt and null subjects, reaching the conclusion that both *pro* and PRO are merely the non-overt counterparts of lexical subjects. They can thus be unified under an ellipsis/deletion analysis, where a null expression will have the syntactico-semantic properties of either *pro* or PRO, depending on its syntactic environment.