

Diachronic development of null-subjects in German

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There is a discussion in the literature as to whether old Germanic languages allow (referential) *pro drop* or not. For Old Icelandic, Sigurðsson (1993) argues that pronominal null-subjects are generally licensed through coindexing with some discourse antecedent, i.e. null subjects are licensed at the level of discourse semantics. Similar views are found for Old High German (OHG) in the traditional literature; cf. Eggenberger (1961), Schrodtt (2004), Schlachter (2010). As opposed to this, Axel (2007) argues for the view that in OHG genuine *pro drop* existed and *pro* was licensed syntactically. Based on new corpus research we re-evaluate the diachronic development of null-subjects in German. In particular, we will discuss the times from MHG to early NHG, which have never before been analyzed. Our hypothesis is that null subjects in German cannot be totally accounted for by the notion of topic-drop. Instead, we argue that German is diachronically (and to a certain degree even synchronically) *also* a *pro-drop-language*.

1 Diachronic evidence

1.1 Types of null-subjects

Our historical data show that in German there were at all times at least two types of null-subjects: context-linked null-subjects (topic drop, diary drop and subject gaps in coordinative structures) and *pro drop* in the narrower sense. Apart from these cases (a-b) there are also further types of subject omissions (c-e), which are hard to analyze either as *pro-drop* or as context-linked null-subjects.

a. context-linked null-subjects: In sentence initial position (SpecCP), topical elements in question-answer pairs (topic drop, 1a) and subjects in coordinative structures (1b) can be elided. Such structures are found already in OHG (cf. 1a):

- (1) a. “*Giloubist* *thu* ... *thiu* *minu* *wórt* *ellu?*“ OHG
“Believe you... the mine words all?“
“[e] *sint, druhtin*“ *quad* *si,*
“[e] are“ Lord“ says she,
“*fēsti* *in* *mines* *hērzen* *brusti* ...” (O III 24,33)
“fast in my heart’s breast“

‘Do you believe all of my words?’

‘(They) are, Lord’, says she, ‘fast in my heart.’

- b. *da schickt der hertzog bei 20 pferd* ENHG
then sends the duke about twenty horses
gen Liechtenberg, und [e] namen das schlos ein
to Liechtenberg and [e] took the castle in
‘Then the duke sends about twenty horses to Liechtenberg and (they)
captured the castle.’ (Rem 209, zit. nach Ebert et al. 1993, 346)

Diary drop differs from topic drop and subject gaps in coordinative structures in that it is constrained to person-ellipsis without any requirement for anaphoric antecedents, which explains the morphological constraints (1/2 SG/PL).

- (2) *Wir haben auch 12 Schwein* early NHG
We have also twelve pigs
in der Mast gehabt.
in the mast had.
[e] Haben ein Schwein davon
[e] have a pig thereof
geschlacht den 25ten Novemberis.
slaughtered the 25th November.
‘We have also fattened 12 pigs. (We) have slaughtered one of these pigs on
the 25th of November.’ (Preis 1636–1667, zit. nach Volodina 2009: 60)

b. *pro*-drop: Apart from sentence initial null subjects, also sentence internal null subjects (= *pro* drop) can be found. *pro* is licensed in the Mittelfeld via c-command relation to AGR. This is the result of verb movement to C°. *pro* drop can be found from OHG to early NHG (Axel 2007; Axel/Weiß 2010, 2011; Volodina 2009, 2011), but it is no longer possible in present day high German.

- (3) *daz koufest [e] an uns beiden* (AH 662) MHG
that purchase [e] by us both
‘(You) purchase that by the both of us.’

In both cases (a and b), diachronically there is a surprising continuity but at the same time, also striking changes can be found.

c. null subjects in embedded V2 clauses: As context-linked null subjects, in these cases the Vorfeld is empty, which is probably the place of the null subject.

- (4) *er chot [e] wollti sizzin nordin* (Summa Theolog. 49) MHG
he said [e] wanted to sit north
‘He said (he) wanted to reside in the north’

d. null subjects in embedded *dass*- or *ob*-clauses (5) and V/E-clauses without *dass* (6): The null subject can only be clause internal in clauses introduced by a complementizer, which probably extends to structures without complementizer as well. This makes these cases candidates for *pro*, even though there is no AGR-in-C licenser in these cases.

- (5) a. *deme sin gewissede daz sagete* (Ava, JG 9,7) MHG
 whom his conscience that said
daz [e] gotes hulde niene habet
 that [e] God's grace not had
 'whose conscience told him, that (he) didn't have God's grace'
- b. *ich solt versuechen,* ENHG
 I should try,
ob [e] ier kran mocht hinab zu ier bringen
 if [e] her crown could down to her bring
 'I should try, if (I) could bring her crown down to her.'
- (6) *sie sprachen [e] iz gerne taeten* (Diemer 133,11) MHG
 they said [e] it gladly would do'
 'They said (that they) would do it gladly'

e. SL in asymmetrical coordination: V/E-clauses can also appear as second conjuncts in matrix-clause-coordination, exhibiting a null subject at the same time.

- (7) *datzu hab ich allzeyt die weysse gehabt* ENHG
 ,to this have I always the disposition had
und [e] fortan haben will (Luther; Ebert et. al. 1993: 346)
 and [e] henceforth have will
 'I have always had the disposition for this and (I) will have it henceforth.'

1.2 Continuity and change for context-linked null subjects (in particular topic-drop)

Null-topics underlie the following constraint: As anaphors (in the original sense) they undergo an anaphoric relationship with the structurally highest argument of the preceding clause, which establishes their referent. This is true for NHG (8a). For earlier stages something like (8b) must be assumed, i.e. the anaphoric relationship between null-topic and antecedent is not yet strictly structural. For this reason not even topic-shift did block topic-drop in those times.

- (8) a. [... α_i ... β_j ...] [$e_{i/*j}$ [C' ...]] NHG
 b. [... α_i ... β_j ...] [e_{ij} [C' ...]] OHG/MHG/ENHG

1.3 Continuity and change for *pro* drop:

New corpus data from ENHG (Volodina 2009, 2011) show striking parallels to OHG (Axel 2007), in particular, that null subjects are constrained to matrix clauses, i.e. the *structural* licensing conditions are the same as in OHG. In present day dialects, the situation is obviously different (for Bavarian see Bayer 1984, Weiß 2005), but only slightly: in dialects the *morphological* licensing conditions have changed in that *pro* is only allowed whenever pronominal inflexion is present (Weiß 2005, Axel/Weiß 2011), hence the preference for 2.SG/PL, but at the same time, *pro* also appears in

embedded clauses because of the (additional, but independent) development of COMP-inflexion:

- (9) a. *Wennsd (du) af Minga kimsd.* Bavarian
 when-2SG (you) to Munich come.
 ‘When (you) come to Munich.’
- b. *Datsd (do) jûn komst.* Friesian
 that-2SG (you) tomorrow come.
 ‘That (you) come tomorrow.’

First results of yet unpublished pilot studies indicate that this situation may have been already obtained at ENHG times: an investigation of texts of Hans Sachs showed that in the 2.SG, the person with the highest probability for *pro* drop in the modern dialects, *pro* drop does indeed occur most frequently: in sentences with subject verb inversion, a null subject (as in 10a) occurs 61 times – what is slightly more as the occurrences of full pronouns (as in 10b) and clitics (as in 10c) taken together (41 and 19 times, respectively):

- (10) a. *Das must einnehmen des tags zwier* (ML 120, V. 78)
 that must take the day twice
 ‘(You) have to take that twice a day.’
- b. *Das bist du auch* (FNS 198, V. 319)
 that are you too
 ‘You are like that too.’
- c. *Dasselbig wölstu mir nach lan* (ML 111, V. 160)
 the same want-you me for let
 ‘You want to let me off the same.’

According to Held (1903: 62), null subjects in *that*-clauses (as in 5a above) occurred frequently in MHG without any restrictions with respect to person. In ENHG, null subjects occurred also in other kinds of complementizer-introduced clauses (e.g., in relative clauses), but mostly with 2.SG subjects (cf. Held 1903: 132). This restriction to the 2.SG is further evidence that *pro* was probably licensed by pronominal agreement in ENHG, but what lacks so far is clear evidence for inflected complementizers at that time. However, in texts of Hans Sachs we found written forms like *dast* ‘that-you’ (cf. 11) which could be evidence for the existence of complementizer inflection in the spoken language (*dass* plus clitic *du* would rather correspond to *dastu* which is also frequently documented in ENHG texts).

- (11) a. *Dast uns so weit fuers aus der stat.* ENHD
 that-2SG us so far lead out of the city.
 ‘That (you) lead us so far out of the city.’ (Sachs, FNS 244 V.152)
- b. *dast in habst verlorn*
 that-2SG him have lost
 ‘That (you) have lost him.’ (Sachs, FNS 172 V.127)
- c. *dast ein zygeuner seist*
 that-2SG a gipsy are’
 ‘That (you) are a gipsy.’ (Sachs, ML 126 V.211)

2 Open questions

We will discuss one general theoretical question (I) and several null-subject specific (II) and construction-specific (III) questions:

(I) *What is the status of German with regard to the null-subject property?*

The general question is whether, to what extent and in what sense German is/was a null-subject language (*pro* drop, semi *pro* drop, topic drop). In order to answer this question, we need an empirically solid and theoretically sound classification of null-subjects, since one can assume that null-subjects are not a homogenous phenomenon. It is beyond doubt that null subjects have very different syntactic/structural, referential and pragmatic properties (cf. e.g. Sprouse & Vance 1999; Fuß & Wratil to appear). Moreover, it is plausible to assume that even in one and the same language there are heterogenic properties both synchronically and also diachronically.

(II) *What are the diachronic changes in the syntactic/structural and pragmatic licensing conditions for different types of null-subjects?*

The specific questions are about the development of *pro* drop in the narrow sense and the relation to the V2 property but also about the factors which play a role in the selection of the proper antecedent for topic drop. We also discuss whether different type of null-subjects can have one unique licensing condition (as e.g. the Empty Left Edge Condition (ELEC) Sigurðsson & Maling (2008), which says that an empty left periphery guarantees a context-linking, which can be interpreted either as topic-linking or antecedent linking (and speaker-hearer linking)).

(III) *What can be said about the special cases of null subjects (+/- *pro*, +/- antecedent-linked etc.) and their licensing conditions?*

In special cases, i.e. in embedded V/E-clauses with or without complementizer or in V/E-matrix clauses, the question is whether we have instances of *pro*-drop or antecedent-linked null-subjects, and what are the exact licensing conditions.

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