

Null subjects in English – economically motivated?

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While it is well-known that (pronominal) subjects can be omitted not only in pro-drop languages such as Russian or Italian, but also in certain registers of English (e.g. diaries), non-overt subjects in casual spoken English have not yet been analysed in any detail. This paper will discuss the factors possibly influencing the choice of overt or non-overt pronouns in a recently collected corpus of vernacular Newfoundland English.

The results of variable rule analyses of some 10,000 (overt and null) tokens show that the presence/absence of pronouns is not solely dependent on factors previously discussed in literature on pro-drop languages. Rather, features such as VP length which are known to have an impact on subject realisation in first language acquisition (cf. e.g. Bloom 1990) should also be taken into consideration. It can be shown that complexity in one part of the sentence such as a complex multi-word/multi-morpheme verb phrase favours simplicity such as null subjects in another part.

Moreover, the data show possible persistence effects to be at work, with one null subject favouring another in the next subject slot. It can also be shown that certain lexical items favour deletion.

Overall, the analyses suggest that not only factors from different languages, both [- pro-drop] and [+ pro-drop], but also from a number of disciplines, including morphosyntax, discourse theory and sociolinguistics, as well as various theoretical frameworks (formal and functional schools) and stages of acquisition/competence (first, second, adult language) should be considered when discussing null subjects in English.

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