

The rise and fall of null subjects: Implications for the theory of pro-drop

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Generative approaches to language change are based on the conviction that the use of a restrictive theory of grammar makes available more accurate descriptions of the diachronic facts. Moreover, the study of language change is taken to inform work on the theory of grammar by providing insights that are not available from a purely synchronic perspective (cf. e.g. Lightfoot 1979: 20). In line with this research agenda, the goals of this paper are twofold. First, it is shown that evidence from the historical emergence of (referential) null arguments raises problems for standard agreement-related theories of pro-drop. Second, it is argued that the relevant historical facts can be better accounted for if we adopt the assumption that the availability of pro-drop may be sensitive to properties of the inventory of (overt) pronominal forms (cf. e.g. Neeleman & Szendrői 2007).

Under the wide-spread assumption that there is a correlation between pro-drop and rich verbal inflection (cf. e.g. Jaeggli & Safir 1989, Roberts 1993, Rohrbacher 1999), we expect that historically, empty subjects become available when the richness of verbal agreement marking crosses a certain threshold. Furthermore, if the “pro-drop parameter” is taken to be binary in nature (i.e., in any given grammar, (referential) pro-drop is either generally available or completely absent, cf. e.g. Müller 2006 for a recent statement), the rise of pro-drop is expected to proceed in an across-the-board fashion, affecting all persons and numbers at once. Drawing on evidence from the historical development of null subjects in varieties of German, French and Italian, we show that these predictions are not borne out by the facts. In particular, it is demonstrated that the rise of pro-drop typically involves an intermediate stage of partial pro-drop, where null subjects are confined to certain slots of the paradigm, compare the examples in (1) and (2) from present-day Bavarian, where referential null subjects are restricted to second person (Bayer 1984).

It is then argued that referential null subjects may develop as a side-effect of the transition from pronouns to agreement markers in cases where the latter change gives rise to gaps in the paradigm of (overt) weak pronominal forms. More precisely, the emergence of (partial) pro-drop is analyzed as an instance of *deblocking*, where a (by assumption universally available, cf. Neeleman & Szendrői 2007) null realization of a weak pronominal D-head becomes available due to the loss of a more specific overt form, which formerly blocked the use of the fully underspecified null spell-out (due to some version of the Elsewhere Condition, e.g. Halle’s 1997 Subset Principle). This historical development, which can be observed in German and Italian dialects (e.g., Bavarian and Vicentino) as well as in non-standard varieties of French, typically takes place in a piecemeal fashion, that is, it affects certain person/number combinations before others, resulting in partial pro-drop. When the development of new inflections is completed for all persons and numbers, which is arguably the case in certain non-standard varieties of French (cf. Fonseca-Greber 2000), this may give the impression that full referential pro-drop is linked to rich verbal agreement. This analysis further predicts the possibility of a contrary change where the development of new weak pronouns leads to the loss of pro-drop. Relevant evidence comes from Colloquial Finnish, where the loss of null subjects (cf. (3a) vs. (3b), Vainikka & Levy 1999) is accompanied by the development of a new series of unstressed pronouns (cf. Table 1; strong and weak forms that are apparently identical differ in vowel length in the spoken language, Anne Vainikka, p.c.). Under the present proposal, the link between changes affecting the availability of null subjects and changes affecting the paradigm of weak pronouns can be analyzed as an instance of morphological blocking where the availability of a more specified phonological exponent (the new overt weak pronouns) blocks the less distinctive null realization of a weak pronominal D-head.

- (1) a. Kumm-st \emptyset noch Minga, dann muaßt *pro* me b'suacha.
 come-2SG to Munich then must-2SG me visit
 'If you come to Munich you must visit me.'
 b. Kumm-ts \emptyset noch Minga, dann müaßt *pro* me b'suacha.
 come-2PL to Munich then must-2PL me visit
 'If you come to Munich you must visit me.'
- (2) a. *Kumm \emptyset noch Minga...
 come-1SG to Munich
 'If I come to Munich, ...'
 b. *Kumm-t \emptyset noch Minga?
 come-3SG to Munich
 'Will he/she/it come to Munich?'
- (3) a. Jään kotiin, jos pyydät kauniisti.
 remain-1SG home-ILL if ask-2SG beautifully
 'I'll stay home if you ask nicely.' (Standard Finnish, Vainikka & Levy 1999: 632)
 b. ?*(Mä) näin sut eilen.
 I.NOM see-PAST-1SG you-ACC yesterday
 'I saw you yesterday.' (Colloquial Finnish, Vainikka & Levy 1999: 662)

	Standard Finnish		Colloquial Finnish	
	strong forms	weak forms	strong forms	weak forms
1sg	minä	\emptyset	minä	mä
2sg	sinä	\emptyset	sinä	sä
3sg	tämä, se	hän	tämä, se	se
1pl	me	\emptyset	me	me
2pl	te	\emptyset	te	te
3pl	ne	he	ne	ne

Table 1: Inventory of subject pronouns: Standard vs. Colloquial Finnish

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