

Null subjects and polarity focus

Anders Holmberg

University of Newcastle

Some null-subject languages can't drop the subject pronoun in the second conjunct in the following context.

(1) Ne sanoo että (minä) en puhu ranskaa mutta *(minä) puhun. (Finnish)
they say that I not-1SG speak French but I speak-1SG
'They say I don't speak French, but I do.'

(2) Keoidei waa Peter m-gong faatman, daanhai *(keoi) gong. (Cantonese Chinese)
they say Peter not-speak French but he speak
'They say that Peter doesn't speak French, but he does.'

Other languages drop the pronoun freely or even obligatorily in the same context. Among the languages that do drop the pronoun are Amharic, Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Persian, Spanish, Turkish, henceforth called A-languages. Among the languages that don't drop the pronoun are Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin), Czech, Finnish, Indonesian, Malayalam, North Saami, Polish, European Portuguese (some speakers), Telugu, henceforth called B-languages.

It is puzzling that pro-drop should be excluded in this context in any null-subject language: The subject of the second conjunct is not focus or a new topic. The languages that rely on agreement for pro-drop have as much subject agreement here as elsewhere, and languages that rely exclusively on discourse for identification of a null subject would seem to have an accessible antecedent in the first conjunct. Two interrelated questions arise:

(a) Why is pro-drop not allowed in this context in the B-languages?

(b) What is the crucial difference between A and B-languages?

The division between A and B-languages cuts across the agreement/discourse pro-drop divide. For instance, Japanese and Chinese are both discourse pro-drop; Japanese is an A-language, Chinese a B-language. Nor does it correlate with defective agreement or partial pro-drop. The B-languages Finnish and North Saami have agreement paradigms which are at least as rich as those of the A-languages Italian and Spanish. The B-language Finnish has partial pro-drop (only 1st and 2nd person), but so does Hebrew, and A-language. It follows language-family lines, but not in every case: Italian and Spanish are A-languages, Portuguese a B-language (for some speakers).

The following is a correlation which is close enough to be taken seriously: When replying affirmatively to a yes/no-question, the A-languages standardly use a special affirmative particle like English *yes*, while the B-languages standardly reply by repeating the finite verb of the question. The connection between (1-3) and yes/no-replies is that both involve polarity focus. In a yes/no-reply the focus is the polarity, while the rest is presupposition, and often entirely deleted.

(3) -- Do you speak French?

-- Yes (I speak French).

In (1,2) the second conjunct contradicts a preceding statement, which is to say that polarity is focused and the rest presupposed.

In Holmberg (2001) I articulate a theory of yes/no-replies in Finnish according to which Pol(arity), taken to be the highest head in IP and incorporating the finite verb, moves to a Polarity-Focus (PolFoc) projection in the C-domain.

(4) -- Puhuuko Pertti ranskaa?

"Does Peter speak French?"

-- Puhuu [_{IP} (Pertti ranskaa)].

speaks Peter French

“Yes.”

The IP is normally deleted, but can in principle be pronounced. The same structure is assumed for (3): *yes* is in $\text{spec}, C_{\text{PolFoc}}$ and the IP is deleted. The IP-deletion must be recovered from the context. This only works if the (immediately preceding) context contains an IP with open (variable) polarity, because PolFoc needs a variable to bind. This is provided (only) if the antecedent of the deleted IP is the IP of a yes/no-question. Therefore the following use of ‘yes’ is odd, unless the parenthesized material is added.

- (5) -- Peter doesn't speak French.
-- Yes #(he does).

Plain ‘yes’ is derived by IP-deletion, but here the context does not provide an antecedent for a deleted IP, but only for a deleted VP. For the same reason the retort in (6) in Finnish, and the one in (7) in Cantonese are odd without the parenthesized material.

- (6) -- Pertti ei puhu ranskaa.
“Peter doesn't speak French.”
-- Puhuu #(se).
speaks he
- (7) -- Peter m-gong faatman.
Peter not-speak French
-- Gong #(keoi gong)
speak he speak.

In both cases adding the parenthesized bit ensures that the expressions are derived by VP-deletion, not IP-deletion.

I propose that the reason why pro-drop is out in (1,2) is that, in this context, a subjectless finite verb is necessarily analyzed as moved to $\text{spec}, \text{PolFoc}$, with IP deleted. But the context does not license IP-deletion. The subjectless versions of (1,2) are out for the same reason as the retorts in (5-7) are. Spelling out the subject ensures that at most the VP (or vP) is deleted, which is licensed by the context.

Languages which don't have verb+Pol-movement to the C-domain don't have this problem: These are the A languages.

The B-languages have VP-deletion, with the verb raised out of VP, and they have subject pro-drop. Therefore an expression like ‘Speaks.’ has two potential derivations: (a) move V+Pol to C and delete IP, (b) move V to Pol only and delete the subject and the VP. For the account above to work, it must be the case that (a) is preferred, hence is derivationally simpler than (b), in a sense to be discussed in the talk.

There are various complications. One is that at least some A-languages also have the option of replying affirmatively by repeating the finite verb. I claim that these replies are not derived by V+Pol-movement to C, but by V-to-Pol with subject pro-drop and VP-deletion. The crucial difference between A and B-languages is whether they have V+Pol-movement to C_{PolFoc} or not.

References:

Holmberg, A. 2001. The syntax of yes and no in Finnish. *Studia Linguistica* 55: 141-174.