

# **The syntax of partial null argument languages: a diachronic perspective**

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# Talk outline

- Types of null argument language (NAL)
- A new type of partial NALs: converging synchronic and diachronic evidence
- The 'null argument cycle' and partial NALs

# Types of NAL

(Holmberg & Roberts 2010: 5–13)

- Non-NALs
- ‘Consistent’ NALs
- Radical NALs
- Partial NALs

# Non-NALs

- Do not permit referential null arguments.
- Examples:
  - English:
    - \* $\emptyset$  Speaks English.
    - \*He hits  $\emptyset$ .
  - (Standard) French
  - German
  - Bambara
- Rarer than NALs (Gilligan 1987; WALs)

# Consistent NALs

- All persons in all tenses can omit (referential and non-referential) pronouns.
- Examples:
  - Italian:
    - $\emptyset$  *Parla italiano* ‘(He/she) speaks Italian.’
  - Pashto (Huang 1984):
    - *ma*  $\emptyset$  *wə-xwar-a* ‘I ate (it).’
  - Greek
- Licensed by ‘rich’ verbal agreement

# Radical NALs

- Pronouns can be omitted freely under appropriate discourse conditions.
- Examples:
  - Chinese:
    - $\emptyset$  *kanjian ta le* '(He) saw him.'
    - *Ta kanjian*  $\emptyset$  *le* 'He saw (him).'
  - Vietnamese
  - Thai
- No connection to verb agreement.

# Partial NALs

- Pronouns can optionally be omitted in certain person/tense combinations.
- Examples:
  - Finnish:
    - *(Minä/∅) puhun englantia* ‘(I) speak English.’
    - *(Hän/\*∅) puhuu englantia* ‘He speaks English.’
  - Hebrew
  - Russian, Marathi, Brazilian Portuguese

# Partial NALs

- In Finnish, for instance, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns can be omitted in any finite context, but not 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns.
- Unlike consistent NALs, partial NALs permit *generic* null subjects:
  - Finnish:
    - *Täällä ei saa polttaa*  
Here NEG may smoke  
'One can't smoke here.'



# Does the person matter?

- Vainikka & Levy (1999: 623): yes.
  - “It cannot be the case that only third person subject pronouns may be omitted, while first/second pronouns must be retained.”
- This predicts that there is no language that is the mirror image of Finnish, in which null subjects are only possible in the third person.

# However...

- Early Northwest Germanic (NWGmc) languages all seem to be like this.
- Null subjects in early NWGmc:

Language	Text	Overt N	%	Null N	%	Source
Old Icelandic	<i>First Grammatical Treatise</i>	170	89.0	21	11.0	Search of IcePaHC 0.3
Old English	<i>Bald's Leechbook</i>	207	81.8	46	18.2	Search of YCOE
Old Saxon	<i>Heliand</i>	2343	95.6	109	4.4	Manual search
Old High German	<i>Isidor</i>	146	72.3	56	27.7	Eggenberger (1961)

Slight differences between searches exist. Ask me if you're interested

- See also Håkansson (2008) on Old Swedish.

# Early NWGmc by person

Old Icelandic

Person	Overt N	%	Null N	%
1sg	79	100.0	0	0.0
1pl	6	100.0	0	0.0
2sg	16	100.0	0	0.0
2pl	0	-	0	-
3sg	52	73.2	19	26.8
3pl	17	89.5	2	10.5

Old Saxon

Person	Overt N	%	Null N	%
1sg	262	100.0	0	0.0
1pl	61	100.0	0	0.0
2sg	247	99.2	2	0.8
2pl	230	99.1	2	0.9
3sg	1089	94.5	63	5.5
3pl	454	91.5	42	8.5

Old English

Person	Overt N	%	Null N	%
1sg	1	100.0	0	0.0
1pl	11	100.0	0	0.0
2sg	52	100.0	0	0.0
2pl	0	-	0	-
3sg	108	77.1	32	22.9
3pl	35	71.4	14	28.6

Old High German

Person	Overt N	%	Null N	%
1sg	36	94.7	5.3	5.3
1pl	2	40.0	3	60.0
2sg	3	60.0	2	40.0
2pl	1	100.0	0	0.0
3sg	15	34.1	29	65.9
3pl	4	25.0	12	75.0

# Early NWGmc variation

- Variation between manuscripts:
  - Old English (*Cædmon's Hymn*, l. 1):
    - Nu ∅ scylun hergan hefaenricaes uard  
(Cambridge University Library MS M)
    - Nu we sculan herian heofonrices Weard  
(Bodleian Library MS T<sub>1</sub>)  
'Now (we) must praise heaven's Lord'
  - Old Saxon (*Heliand*, l. 1628):
    - Oc scal ic iu te uuarun seggean (MS M)
    - Oc scal ∅ iu te uaron seggean (MS C)  
'(I) will also truly tell you'

# Early NWGmc variation

- Variation between texts/dialects:
  - Old English:
    - Found in *Beowulf*, *Bald's Leechbook*, *Bede's Historia*, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the *Rushworth Glosses* and the *Lindisfarne Gospels*.
    - Not found in e.g. *Ælfric*, *Alfred*, *Wulfstan*.
    - Anglian dialect feature? (Walkden 2012)
  - Old High German:
    - Found in e.g. *Isidor*, *Tatian*.
    - Not found in later OHG such as *Notker* (Axel 2007: 298).

# 'Non-syntactic' explanations

- Could the occurrence of null subjects be 'merely' due to the influence of Latin/metrical requirements/register?
  - Syntactic distribution (much more common in 3<sup>rd</sup> than in 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> persons, less common in subordinate clauses) makes this unlikely.
  - Distribution across texts makes this unlikely.
- We're dealing with a native phenomenon.

# Early NWGmc: summary

- Null subjects are much more common in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person than in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup>.
- Null subjects occur with much lower frequency in subordinate clauses.\*
- Null objects can also be found:
  - Old Saxon:
    - *endi regintheobos farstelad Ø, uurmi auuardiad Ø*  
and thieves steal worms spoil  
'and thieves steal (it), worms spoil (it)'  
(*Heliand* ll. 1644–1645)

\* Except in Old Icelandic.

# Analysis: rich agreement?

- Traditional account following Taraldsen (1978) attributes null subjects to rich agreement. But this can't account for the early NWGmc facts.
  - Early NWGmc agreement is just too weak.
  - Differences between texts/dialects/langs would not be explained.
  - An agreement-driven account would predict null objects to be impossible.



# How rich is rich?

- Rohrbacher (1999: 116): RefNSs are present if ‘in at least one number of one tense of the regular verb paradigms, the person features [1] and [2] are both distinctively marked’
  - ✓ Predicts RefNSs in early NWGmc. ✗ But also in modern German and Icelandic.
- Müller (2005): RefNSs are present unless system-wide syncretisms in verb paradigms exist.
  - ✗ Predicts no RefNSs in early NWGmc (as Müller acknowledges).
- Tamburelli (2006: 443): RefNSs are present if ‘each of the possible feature types [ $\pm$  speaker,  $\pm$  addressee,  $\pm$  singular – GW] appears in both a positive and a negative setting within the paradigm’
  - ✓ Predicts RefNSs in early NWGmc and Finnish, and ✓ not in German or Icelandic. ✗ But also in standard French.

# Analysis: radical NAL?

- Is OE a radical NAL like Japanese and Imbabura Quechua?
- Neeleman & Szendrői (2007, 2008) suggest that such languages require agglutinating morphology on pronouns.
- For early NWGmc, this doesn't seem like a plausible analysis.

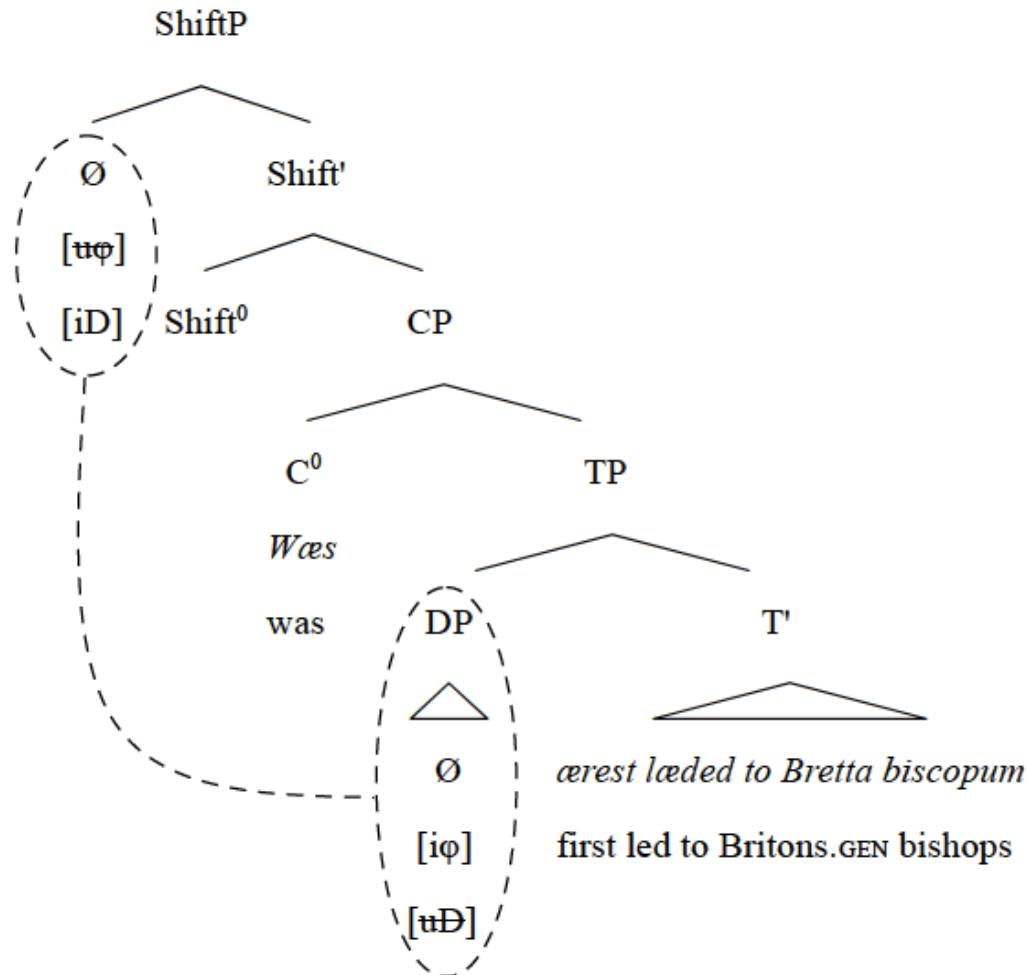
# Analysis: partial NAL

- The remaining option: analyse the early NWGmc languages as partial NALS.
- In essence, we're dealing with 'mirror-image Finnish' (*pace* Vainikka & Levy 1999).
- Other languages recently discovered to be like this:
  - Old North Russian? (Kwon 2009)
  - Shipibo (Camacho & Elías-Ulloa 2010)

# Sketch of an analysis

- In Holmberg's (2010) analysis of partial NALs, null 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person subjects are licensed by agreement with logophoric agent and patient ( $\Lambda_A$  and  $\Lambda_P$ ; Sigurðsson 2004) elements in the left periphery.
- In early NWGmc (by assumption) this strategy was not available. Instead an Aboutness topic in the left periphery could license a null subject.
- This accounts for the person split: it is difficult (though not impossible) for first and second person entities to become the Aboutness-topic of a discourse (Sigurðsson 1993: 254).

# Example from Old English



'He was first led to the priests of the Britons'

(cobede, Bede\_2:2.100.3.926)

# Generic null subjects

- Early NWGmc exhibited generic null subjects:
  - Old Icelandic:
    - *en Ø heyrði til hǫDo, þá er þór bar hverinn*  
but heard to handle when Thor carried kettle  
'But (one) could hear the handle rattle when Thor carried the kettle'  
(11XX.FIRSTGRAMMAR.SCI-LIN,.170)
  - Old High German:
    - *Gebet, thanne Ø gibit íu*  
give.2PL, then give.3SG YOU.PL.DAT  
'Give, and it shall be given to you'  
(Otfrid 39,3; Eggenberger 1962: 102)

# Synchrony and diachrony

- Here, facts from a diachronic study (or at least a historical one) can contribute to synchronic syntactic typology.
- But what about a diachronic perspective on partial NALs?
- Where do they come from?

# Tentative proposal

- Partial NALs develop **from** consistent NALs, and develop **into** non-NALs.
- Evidence:
  - Brazilian Portuguese: used to be a consistent NAL like modern European Portuguese (Roberts 2011)
  - Marathi: ~ descended from Sanskrit, a consistent NAL (Kiparsky 2009: 55)
  - Russian: ~ descended from Old Church Slavonic, a consistent NAL (Kwon 2009)
  - Finnish: the spoken language uses null subjects less. Change in progress? (What about its history?)
  - French: arguably went through a partial NAL stage (see e.g. Zimmermann 2009).



# Germanic

- The standard NWGmc languages have all lost the null-subject property (except, arguably, Icelandic).
- In Gothic, the earliest-attested Germanic language, null subjects were much more frequent (Fertig 2000; Ferraresi 2005).
  - However, caution is required here.
- If Gothic represents an earlier stage, then Germanic exhibits the full pathway.

# Summary and conclusions

- Diachronic data from early Northwest Germanic lead us to reconsider the typology of null argument languages.
  - In early NWGmc, null subjects were only frequent in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person.
  - A new type of partial null argument language should be recognized.
- Partial NALs may represent a late stage in the ‘null argument cycle’, leading to the loss of null arguments altogether.

**Thanks for listening!**

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