

The syntax of partial null argument languages

a view from early Northwest Germanic

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Summary

In this poster I analyse null arguments in early Northwest Germanic (eNWGmc) in order to argue for a modified version of Holmberg's (2010) approach to partial null argument languages (NALs). Data is drawn from Old English (OE), Old High German (OHG), Old Icelandic (OI), Old Norwegian (ON), Old Saxon (OS), and Old Swedish (OSw).

The data: key generalizations

Referential null subjects were a possibility in eNWGmc, but only frequently occurred:

- in main or conjoined clauses (NB: Old Icelandic is an exception here)
 - in the third person
- In addition, we find:
- referential null objects
 - generic null subjects

Quantitative data by clause type

OE: Beowulf	OHG: Isidor	OI: Morkinskinna																																																							
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Generally, the favouring effect of main over subordinate is statistically significant, though not in Old Icelandic, where the reverse effect is sometimes found (see Kinn 2013, Håkansson 2013, and Walkden 2014 for details).

Impossible analyses: Topic drop?

Topic drop in the modern Germanic languages requires the dropped element to be in SpecCP. This is clearly not the case in examples 1–6. Therefore, topic drop is ruled out (cf. also van Gelderen 2013: 275 for OE, Axel 2007 for OHG, Sigurdsson 1993 for OI, Håkansson 2013 for OSw). A topic drop analysis also predicts, falsely, that:

- null arguments should be ruled out in subordinate clauses
- null arguments should be ruled out in interrogatives

(Håkansson 2013, however, presents an account of OSw in which an 'extended' version of topic drop is possible, circumventing these problems; this hinges on an analysis of SpecIP as an A'-position.)

Impossible analyses: Rich agreement?

van Gelderen (2000, 2013) pursues an analysis in which OE has 'Romance-style pro-drop' (2013: 284). But rich verbal agreement is unlikely to play a role at the eNWGmc stage, since agreement is (on the whole) simply not rich enough. Paradigm for OS weak verb *nērian* 'to save' (Walkden 2014: 199):

Person & no.	Present ind.	Past ind.	Present sbjv.	Past sbjv.
1sg	nēri-u	nēri-d-a	nēri-e	nēri-d-i
2sg	nēri-s	nēri-d-es	nēri-es	nēri-d-is
3sg	nēri-ēd	nēri-d-a	nēri-e	nēri-d-i
pl	nēri-ad	nēri-d-un	nēri-en	nēri-d-in

Paradigm for OSw weak verb *kalla* 'to call' (Håkansson 2013: 172):

Person & no.	Present ind.	Past ind.
sg	kall-ar	kalla-þ-i
1pl	kall-um	kalla-þ-um
2pl	kall-in	kalla-þ-in
3pl	kall-a	kalla-þ-u

For other eNWGmc languages, see Walkden (2014: 198–199). OE and OS have total syncretism across the plural; OSw has virtually total syncretism across the singular (-r may be absent in 1sg.ind). In OHG and OI agreement is richer, but there is still syncretism between 1sg and 3sg in the past tense. Does this count as rich? Depends on your theory:

- Rohrbacher (1999: 116): Null subjects 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 null subjects in all eNWGmc languages, but also in modern German and Icelandic. **Too weak.**
- Müller (2005): Null subjects are present unless system-wide syncretisms in verb paradigms exist. – Predicts no null subjects in eNWGmc. **Too strong.**
- Tamburelli (2006: 443): Null subjects 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 null subjects in OE, OS, OHG, and Finnish, and not in German or any North Germanic language (unless you count past), but also in French. **Close but no cigar.**

Other problems for a rich agreement account of eNWGmc:

- it predicts null objects to be impossible (since there is no object agreement)
- it cannot account for the loss of null subjects in certain contexts in the history of Icelandic, where agreement has remained essentially constant (Sigurdsson 1993; Kinn, Rusten & Walkden forthcoming)
- eNWGmc languages do not display obviation effects, unlike canonical agreement-driven NSLs (Walkden 2014: 200–201)

I therefore conclude that agreement has no role to play.

Quantitative data by person

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Generally, the effect of 3rd vs. non-3rd person is statistically significant (see Kinn 2013, Håkansson 2013, and Walkden 2014 for details).

Figure 1: Null subjects in eNWGmc: main vs. subordinate clauses

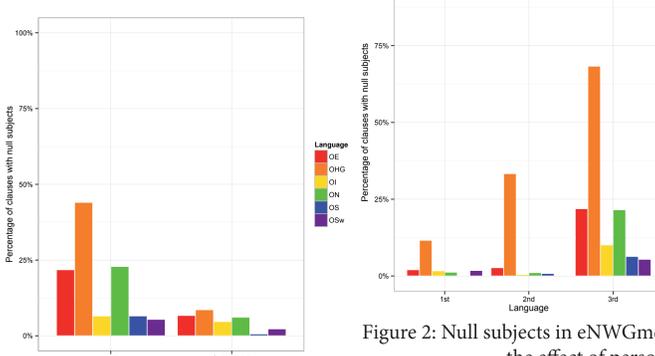


Figure 2: Null subjects in eNWGmc: the effect of person

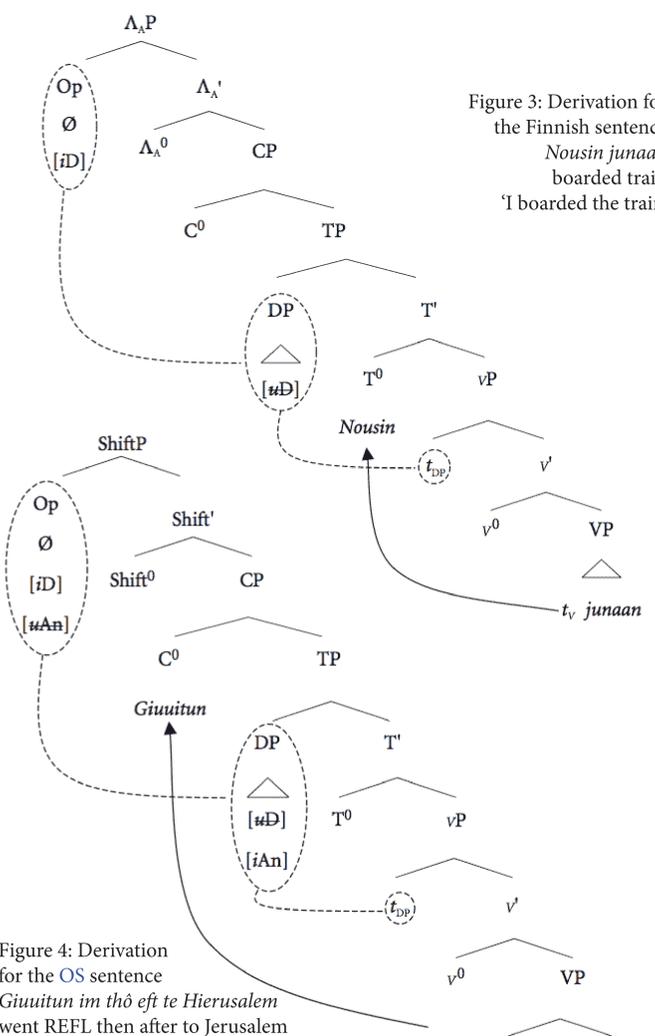


Figure 4: Derivation for the OS sentence 'Giuuitun im thò eft te Hierusalem' (Then they went to Jerusalem). The tree shows the derivation of the null subject [iAn] in the CP position. The subject DP is [iAn], and the verb is 'Giuuitun'. The tree structure is: CP (Op [iAn], C^0) -> TP (DP [iAn], T^0) -> TP (DP [iAn], T^0) -> VP (v^0, VP) -> VP (v^0, VP).

Holmberg (2010): consistent vs. partial NALs

Partial NALs: Finnish, Marathi, Hebrew... These allow 1st and 2nd person null subjects, but 3rd person ones only when bound by a higher argument. Holmberg's (2010: 101–104) analysis:

- RefNSs in canonical null subject languages are ϕ Ps that are incorporated into the verb in T. T has an uninterpretable D-feature ([uD]), which needs to be checked/valued in order for the (null) subject to be referential.
- RefNSs in partial null subject languages are silent DPs with an uninterpretable D-feature.
- [uD] features need to be valued by Agree with a higher element.
- Finnish has two ways of valuing the [uD] feature on the subject DP: In the case of 1st and 2nd person null subjects, it is valued by agreement with operators in the speaker (Λ_A) or addressee (Λ_P) projections in the left periphery. See Figure 3. In the case of 3rd person referential null subjects, it is valued through control.

Examples

- þonne bið on hreþre under helm drepen biteran stræle then is in heart under helm hit bitter dart 'Then he is hit in the heart, under the helmet, by the bitter dart' (OE; YCOEP, Pintzuk & Plug 2001, cobeowul,54.1745.1443)
 - Sume hahet in cruci some-ACC hang-2PL to cross 'Some of them you will crucify' (OHG; Monsee Fragments XVIII.17; Matthew 23:34; Axel 2007: 293)
 - þá skar Rognvaldr hár hans, en áðr var úskorit then cut R. hair his but before was uncut 'Then Rognvaldr cut his hair, but it had been uncut before' (OI; Nygaard 1906: 10)
 - þa var hanum sact then was him told 'Then it was told to him' (ON; OSHL, 21774; Kinn 2013)
 - libes uueldi ina bilðsien, of he mahti gilðstien sò life.GEN would him take if he could achieve so 'he would take his life if he could' (OS; Heliand 1442; Walkden 2014: 192)
 - þar gierþi kirchiu aþra there made church other 'There he built another church.' (OSw; Håkansson 2013: 156)
- Referential null objects:
- huuand it rotat hîr an roste, endi regintheobos farstelad because it rusts here to rust and thieves steal 'because it rusts away, and thieves steal it ...' (OS; Heliand 1644–1645; Walkden 2014: 195)
- Generic null subjects:
- Wiþ þæs magan springe þonne þurh muð bitere hræcð for the maw.GEN sore.DAT when through mouth bitterly retches 'For sores of the mouth when one retches bitterly through the mouth' (OE; YCOE, Taylor et al. 2003, colaece,Lch_II_[2]:15.1.1.2296)

Third person is a person too

There is independent typological evidence for 'mirror image Finnish' (falsifying the prediction of Vainikka & Levy 1999: 623): languages where only third person, and not first and second person, subjects can be null.

- Shipibo (Camacho & Elías-Ulloa 2010), a Panoan language
- Old North Russian (Kwon 2009)
- Tongan (Otsuka 2000: 60–65)

A partial NAL analysis of eNWGmc

- 1st and 2nd person referential null subjects are not generally available, because an Agree relation can't be established between left-peripheral elements and the [uD] DP.
- 3rd person referential null subjects have their [uD] feature valued by an aboutness topic operator in the left periphery (unavailable in Finnish). See Figure 4.
- Predicts null objects (if a [uD]-bearing object ends up higher in the tree than the subject by independent means).
- Predicts generic null subjects (ϕ P incorporated into T).
- Rarity of null arguments can be captured if subordinate finite clauses in OHG and OS are islands with respect to agreement and do not always project a complete and active left periphery (cf. Haegeman 2006).
- Implications for typology of partial NALs: ability of left-peripheral elements to probe is simply parameterized.

Conclusion: the new type of partial NAL analysis is well motivated typologically & able to capture the eNWGmc facts.

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