Partial pro-drop as null NP-anaphora

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Even though it has become clear over the years that pro-drop is not a yes-no matter and that a variety of factors may condition this phenomenon both within a language and cross-linguistically, it is possible to isolate at least three patterns of Null Subject Language (NSL):

- Languages with rich subject verbal agreement morphology (henceforth consistent NSLs), such as the Romance NSLs, Hungarian, Greek, among many others.

- Languages that have null subjects (NS) whose distribution is highly constrained (henceforth partial NSLs), such as Hebrew, Finnish, Hindi, Russian, colloquial Brazilian Portuguese (cf. Holmberg et. al. 2009); many of them show an asymmetry between first/second and third persons; a definite 3rd person NS requires an antecedent in a higher clause; even though the subject verbal agreement paradigms vary considerably from one language to the other, they all evidence at least some form of φ-feature syncretism.

- Languages that lack agreement, such as Chinese, Japanese and Korean. These have been described as topic-prominent (Huang 1984) and allow any argument to be dropped, not just subjects (cf. Neeleman and Szendrői 2007).

As noted by Holmberg et al. (2010), one key property that distinguishes the NSLs of Types 2 and 3 from those of Type 1 is that a third person subject can have a generic interpretation equivalent to English ‘one’ (which may include the speaker and the addressee) (see also Rodrigues 2004). The consistent NSLs, by contrast, must resort to some overt strategy in order to convey this reading. So as to capture this difference, Holmberg (2005) proposes that the distinctive property of the consistent NSLs as opposed to the other types of NSL is that T has a D-feature encoding definiteness. In Holmberg’s system (as well as Roberts’s 2010), positing this feature has an impact on the interpretation of the null subject (considered a pronoun which is deleted in PF), but has no consequences on the syntax of overt pre-verbal subjects: in all of these languages, they are assumed to raise to Spec-TP and check the EPP. However, the languages of Type 2 and Type 3 differ from the languages of Type 1 with regard to the distribution and interpretation of overt subjects. Consider the following Portuguese examples:

(1) O João disse que ele comprou um computador.

the João said that he bought a computer

‘John said that he bought a computer’

In the European variety of Portuguese (EP), the embedded pronoun in (1) is preferably interpreted as non-co-referential with the matrix subject. For co-reference, the null subject option is used (the so-called Avoid Pronoun Principle). In Brazilian Portuguese (BP), however, the overt pronoun in (1) may be co-referent with the matrix subject; in fact, both options, with or without an overt pronoun, are available in this language whenever there is co-reference. Similar facts obtain in all the other partial NSLs and in Type 3 languages. Since, under the pronoun deletion analyses, the presence of the D-feature in T has no impact on the status of overt preverbal subject pronouns, these facts are left unaccounted for.

One alternative analysis of Type 1 languages is that Agr is interpretable in this kind of NSL thus behaving like a pronominal affix (Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou 1998, Ordoñez and Treviño 1998, Barbosa, Kato & Duarte 2005, among others). One of the corollaries of this approach is that pre-verbal (non-quantified) subjects are Clitic Left Dislocated (CLLD) in these languages. Viewed in this light, the
Avoid Pronoun Principle simply reduces to the preference for not merging a pronoun as a CLLDed Topic unless it is required to signal topic switch or for emphasis/empathy. In a partial null subject language, on the other hand, the overt pronoun is a genuine argument that raises to pre-verbal position and so we see no effect of topic switch.

The two facts mentioned — the availability of a generic (inclusive) reading for the 3rd person NS and absence of the effects of the Avoid Pronoun Principle — indicate that the pattern of pro-drop found in the partial NSLs has more features in common with discourse pro-drop than with rich agreement pro-drop. Rodrigues (2004), Holmberg (2005) observe that in Finnish as well as BP the generic NS stays in situ; the definite interpretation is available just in case the NS raises to a high position. Holmberg assumes that this position is Spec-TP. However, Holmberg and Nikane (2002) show that the same position can host other categories besides subjects and is associated with topics so that Finnish can be considered a topic prominent language. On the basis of these observations and on the fact that BP too is a topic prominent language, Modesto (2008) argues that the definite NS in these languages is itself in topic position (i.e., it is a null topic in the sense of Huang 1984) thus collapsing partial pro-drop with discourse pro-drop. One strong argument in favor of this approach is that Finnish as well as BP do have null objects.

Among the analyses that have been proposed in the literature on discourse pro-drop is the hypothesis that it reduces to null-NP anaphora (Tomioka 2003). Tomioka observes that all of the languages that allow discourse pro-drop allow (robust) bare NP arguments and proposes that what underlies discourse pro-drop is the fact that languages (almost) universally allow phonologically null NP anaphora (also known as N’ or NP ellipsis). In a language that lacks determiners, this operation will give rise to phonologically unrealized arguments. In languages in which DPs are necessarily projected, a remnant D will always show up and so this process will never give rise to a silent argument.

If indeed partial pro-drop is to be collapsed under discourse pro-drop, the null NP-anaphora hypothesis would predict that the partial pro-drop languages should allow bare NPs in argument positions; this prediction is, in fact, confirmed: Finnish doesn’t have determiners and BP, unlike EP, has bare singular nouns (cf. Müller 2001, Schmidt & Munn 1999). Moreover, Hindi, Hebrew and Russian all have null objects as well as bare singular nouns in argument position (cf. Doron 2003). Thus, the null NP anaphora hypothesis makes the right predictions for the partial NSLs discussed in the literature. This means that it possible to assume a two way split: on the one hand, we have agreement pro-drop (possibly a case of interpretable/pronominal Agr, in the spirit of Jelinek 1984, Baker 1996); on the other, we have null NP-anaphora. One advantage of this approach is that it is sufficiently flexible to allow for mixed systems. Thus, a certain language may allow a null argument in certain environments though not in others depending on whether it allows a bare NP as argument in that environment. The Romance null indefinite/arbitrary object is a case in point given that it apparently occurs only in the environments in which these languages have bare plurals (cf. Raposo 1998) for Romance and Tomioka (2003) for a discussion of Greek null indefinite objects). European Portuguese is the only Romance language that has definite null objects. However, Raposo (1998) argued that this option is connected to the unique distribution of bare plurals in this language as opposed to the other Romance languages. He claimed that EP has a null definite D and that the null object is a null D with a null NP complement. Thus, this is a case of null NP-anaphora that yields a silent argument in a language that doesn’t allow bare NPs in argument position. The question why English doesn’t have null subjects or objects will be taken up as a challenge for future work.