

Null Pronouns – A Phenomenon Evoked By Morphology?

Some languages allow pronouns in subject as well as in object position to be dropped that is to say their respective grammars admit theta roles not stated explicitly but assigned implicitly. I shall show in how far this phenomenon might be accounted for by certain morphological structures as well as consider occurrences of null pronouns in language which obviously cannot be explained by the respective morphology of that particular language.

The most prominent examples of so-called 'pro-drop' languages, that is to say languages that not only allow pronouns to be dropped in either subject or object position but in which this case actually is the generic one, are Italian and Spanish. In both languages, first of all, the subject pronoun is elided except special emphasis is put on the subject of the sentence in contrast to the subject of an aforementioned one:

Spanish:	Hablas mucho
Italian:	Parli molto
English:	*Speak much

Note that in the Spanish and Italian sentences the subject pronoun is missing while the sentences remain perfectly well-formed, whereas the same utterance cannot be made in English without placing the pronoun 'you' in subject position.

Furthermore, regarding Italian and Spanish, dropping of pronouns is not only generic as for the subject theta role, but also concerning object positions as is epitomized by an example alleged by Rizzi (1986a) in a study of differences between English and Italian:

Italian:	Un dottore serio visita nudi
English:	*A serious doctor visits nude

Whilst the Italian sentence is grammatical, its presumptive English equivalent quite obviously is not, since a pronoun functioning as a so-called direct object controller is absolutely essential in English. The English sentence 'A serious doctor visits them nude' hence would be grammatical. Note that the Italian variant 'Un dottore serio li visita nudi' would be possible as well, but the generic case appears to be the one with the object pronoun dropped. This relation is expounded by Williams in "Theta Theory" as follows: "Italian, but not English seems to permit a direct object controller to be missing, although both languages permit direct objects in general to be missing, as idiosyncratically specified by particular verbs."

These idiosyncracies originating from the demands of certain verbs or the structure imposed by the use of certain types of subordinate clauses can be recognized considering these English sentences:

*Hamlet promised to avenge his father
I seem happy*

In the first sentence the null-pronoun of the subordinate clause is controlled by the subject of the matrix clause and therefore is not realized explicitly, as to the second sentence no object pronoun is visible, forasmuch as the verb "to seem" is specified as taking no direct object, because of already containing the information of who actually "seems", that is to say the subject of the sentence.

Coming back to the absence of visible direct object controllers in Italian Rizzi suggests that this controller actually is present, but realized as 'small pro', that is, analogously to subject pronouns, in the morphology of the respective related object. Hence, the idea of 'pro-drop' tendencies of a particular language caused by ambiguities being ruled out by the morphological system of that language is quite close at hand, nevertheless there are languages like Chinese that apparently allow pronouns to be dropped although no morphological features rule out the ambiguities emerging from that:

- a) Zhangsan shuo (ta) bu renshi Lisi
Zhangsan say (he) not know Lisi
'Zhangsan said that he does not know Lisi'
- b) Zhangsan shuo Lisi bu renshi (ta)
Zhangsan say Lisi not know (him)
'Zhangsan said that Lisi does not know him'

As for a) the pronoun in brackets may relate to the subject of the matrix clause as well as to some other antecedent, whether it is realized or not, just as the English counterpart 'he' might relate to the subject of the matrix clause to some antecedent outside the sentence, while pertaining to b), if the object pronoun is null, then it can only refer to another individual.

On account of that, though appearing quite appropriate in the first place, on a closer view it must be argued that 'pro-drop' features of a particular language do not need to be evoked by its morphological features, but can also appear in languages showing no such features, which can be explained by native speakers of those languages being capable of getting the meaning intended to be conveyed by the speaker out of a supposedly ambiguous sentence by the environment in which it is set.