

# Null pronouns in English

## Evidence from particle verb constructions

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**Précis:** A class of English particle verbs which show an argument structure alternation between ground promotion and figure retention shows a pragmatic asymmetry. A closer look at this asymmetry reveals a previously undescribed null pronoun. A previous account of ground promotion predicts both the asymmetry and the null pronoun. The properties of this null argument allow for some comparisons to be made to better described null arguments in other languages.

## 1 Outline

- Some background on particle verbs in general.
- Introduce ground promotion/figure retention particle verb constructions.
- Arguments for a null pronoun in English: empirical and theoretical.
- A discussion of this new null pronoun and its place among other null arguments.

## 2 Background

- Particle Verbs (PVs) are a type of complex predicates, common to Germanic languages, which consist of a lexical verb and an adpositional element.
- In English they are remarkable in that they undergo *particle shift*.

### (1) Particle Shift

- a. Discontinuous Order  
Jamie **turned** {the offer/it} **down**.
- b. Continuous Order  
Jamie **turned down** {the offer/\*it}.

- PVs also tend to differ in argument structure from their simplex counterparts.
- McIntyre (2007) gives an overview of the various argument structures of PVs

- Of interest to us will be those that show what McIntyre refers to as *ground promotion*
- To understand Ground Promotion, we must first look at the Figure and Ground thematic roles
- Figure and Ground refer to the thematic roles of the arguments of prepositions.
  - The ground (or location) is the argument relative to which spatial relations are evaluated.
  - the figure (or locatum) is the argument whose position, motion, or extension is described relative to the ground.

- Prepositions describe the location of a figure in relation to a ground.

- (2) a. I poured [the water]<sub>Figure</sub> out of [the bucket]<sub>Ground</sub>.  
 b. I wiped [the dust]<sub>Figure</sub> off [the table]<sub>Ground</sub>

- In ground promotion PV constructions the ground argument of the PP is promoted to direct object

- (3) Ground Promotion

*wipe*

Agent	Figure	Ground
DP	DP	DP

 $\Rightarrow$  *wipe off*

Agent	Ground
DP	DP

- (4) I wiped [the dust]<sub>Figure</sub> off [the table]<sub>Ground</sub>.  $\Rightarrow$  I wiped off [the table]<sub>Ground</sub>.

- In English, ground promotion PVs tend to be combinations of cleaning verbs and the preposition *off* or *out*.

- (5) a. rinse the pot out.  
 b. clear the room out.  
 c. brush the jacket off.

- Ground promotion PVs tend to have a resultative counterpart in which only the figure is expressed.

- I refer to these resultatives as *figure retention* PVs.

(6) *wipe*

Agent	Figure	Ground
DP	DP	DP

 $\Rightarrow$  *wipe off*

Agent	Figure
DP	DP

- (7) I wiped [the dust]<sub>Figure</sub> off [the table]<sub>Ground</sub>.  $\Rightarrow$  I wiped off [the dust]<sub>Figure</sub>.

- Both figure retention and ground promotion PVs allow particle shift.

- (8) a. Ground Promotion  
 wipe {the table/it} off.  
 wipe off {the table/\*it}.

- b. Figure Retention  
wipe {the dust/it} off.  
wipe off {the dust/\*it}.
  - When the object of these PVs is a pronoun, there is no preference for it to be interpreted as either a figure or a ground.
- (9) There's dust<sub>i</sub> on that table<sub>j</sub>, can you wipe it<sub>i/j</sub> off?
- There is, however, a pragmatic asymmetry in the interpretation of the two types of PVs.
  - Levin and Sells (2007) note that, while ground promotion requires no contextual support for interpretation, figure retention requires a contextually salient ground for proper interpretation.
- (10) The maid said that as part of her job . . . (adapted from Levin and Sells, 2007)
- a. #she has to wipe fingerprints off.
  - b. she has to wipe mirrors off.

### 3 The Null Pronoun

- The pragmatic asymmetry between ground promotion and figure retention provides evidence for a null pronoun in figure retention constructions.
- These pronouns are predicted by an existing syntactic analysis of ground promotion.

#### 3.1 Evidence for Null Grounds

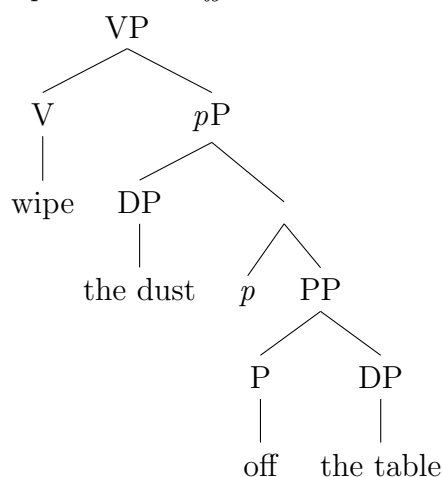
- A closer look at figure retention PV constructions reveals that the requirement for contextual support is due to a null pronoun in the ground argument position, which gets its reference from the context.
- (11) a. Whenever Jim wears his blazer, [he wipes the fingerprints off.]  
**Interpretation:** He wipes the fingerprints off **his blazer**.  
b. Whenever Karen uses the coffee pot, [she rinses the oatmeal out.]  
**Interpretation:** She rinses the oatmeal out of **the coffee pot**.
- In ground promotion constructions, a contextually salient object is not interpreted as the figure argument of the PV, because there is no null pronoun in figure argument position.
- (12) a. Whenever Sheila sees fingerprints, [she brushes her blazer off.]  
**Interpretation:** She brushes something off her blazer.  
**Not:**She brushes **fingerprints** off her blazer.

- b. Whenever Tom finds oatmeal, [he rinses the coffee pot out]  
**Interpretation:** He rinses something out of the coffee pot.  
**Not:** He rinses **oatmeal** out of the coffee pot.
  - The null grounds in figure retention are semantically similar to pronouns
  - Compare the interpretation pattern of figure retention/ground promotion to the interpretation of pronouns.
- (13) Transitives with pronouns (*cf.* (11))
- a. Whenever Ellie sees a chair, she fights it.  
**Interpretation:** She fights the chair.
  - b. Whenever Oliver sees a plant, he eats it.  
**Interpretation:** He eats the plant.
- (14) Intransitives (*cf.* (12))
- a. Whenever Ellie sees a chair, she fights.  
**Interpretation:** She fights  
**Not:** \*She fights the chair.
  - b. Whenever Oliver sees a plant, he eats.  
**Interpretation:** He eats (something)  
**Not:** \*He eats the plant.
- Like pronouns, null grounds can be *donkey-anaphors*
- (15) Every Farmer who owns a donkey<sub>*i*</sub>, beats it<sub>*i*</sub>.
- (16) Every butler who is holding a glass<sub>*i*</sub> must wipe off *e<sub>i</sub>* his fingerprints.
- It follows from the data presented here, that figure retention PV constructions project an empty category as the ground argument, while ground promotion PVs do not project any empty categories.

### 3.2 Theoretical support

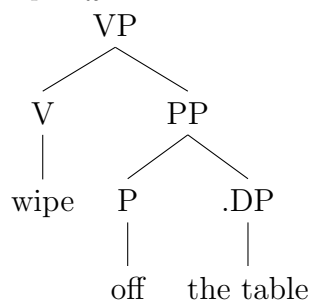
- Svenonius (2003) proposes a small-clause-type analysis of ground promotion that derives the PV from a verb + PP structure.
- Svenonius proposes a *pP* which is comparable to VoiceP/*vP*.

(17) *wipe the dust off the table*



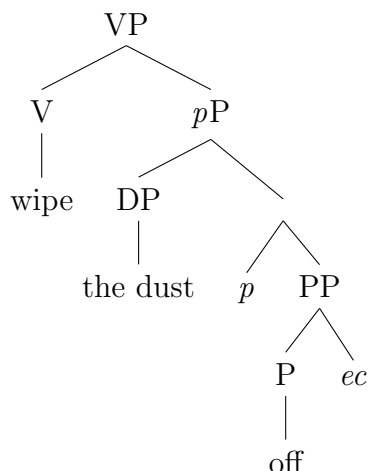
- In the Svenonius'  $pP$ ,  $p$  introduces the figure argument and Case-licenses the ground argument.
- Ground promotion occurs when  $p$  is not merged into the derivation or a defective  $p$  is merged.

(18) *wipe off the table*



- Svenonius only accounts for ground promotion, but his account of ground promotion also predicts the null ground argument in figure retention constructions.
- Since it introduces the figure argument,  $p$  must be in the structure.
- The head that encodes both the phonological and core semantic information of the particle (P) must also be present.
- P introduces a ground argument, in the case of figure retention PVs it introduces the null pronoun.

(19) *wipe the dust off*



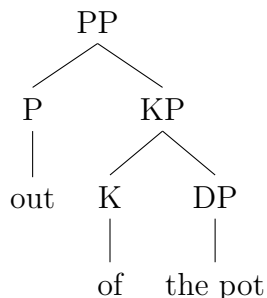
## 4 Formal Properties of the Null Ground

- Since null pronouns in English are restricted to ground arguments, it is worthwhile to discuss some properties of ground arguments.
- I will also compare the properties of null grounds to those of better studied null arguments.

### 4.1 On the Ground Argument

- Ground arguments are distinct from verbal arguments semantically.
- Rather than individuals/entities, prepositions relate regions in space. (Zwarts and Winter, 2000)
- To change a entity-denoting DP to an expression that encode the space occupied by that entity, Svenonius (2010) proposes a functional head (K) that merges with a ground DP.
- In languages with case morphology, K can be spelled out as an oblique case, while in English it is sometimes spelled out as *of*.

(20) *out of the pot*



- Ground arguments in ground promotion PVs are KPs with a null K

- (21) a. \*Jamie rinsed the pot out of.  
b. \*Alex brushed the dust off of.

- Null grounds, then are null KPs rather than null DPs

## 4.2 English null grounds and other null arguments

- Where do null grounds fit with null arguments in other languages.

### Radical pro-drop

- (22) a. Q: Zhangsan kanjian Lisi le ma?  
Z. see L. LE Q  
“Did Zhangsan see Lisi?”  
b. A: (ta/e) kanjian (ta/e) le.  
he see he LE  
“He saw him” (Mandarin; Huang, 1984))

- By its very definition, radical pro-drop is not restricted to any particular syntactic configuration.
- This contrasts with null grounds which are restricted to the complement of P.

### Null subjects in pro-drop languages

- (23) e Ho trovato il libro  
have.1SG found the book  
“(I) have found the book” (Italian; Roberge, 1990)

- Like null grounds, null subjects are restricted to a specific syntactic position (Subject position).
- Unlike null grounds, they are associated with rich agreement morphology.

### German Topic Drop

- (24) e<sub>i</sub> Hab’ ich t<sub>i</sub> schon gesehen.  
have I already seen  
“I have seen him/her/it/them already.” (Huang, 1984)

- Like null grounds, null topics in German are restricted to a specific syntactic position (spec-CP), and are not associated with rich agreement morphology.
- Unlike null grounds, which are KPs, null topics are DPs.
- Neither null subjects, nor null topics are associated with other syntactically anomalous behaviour as null grounds are (*i.e.*, Particle shift)

## 5 Conclusion

- Ground promotion and figure retention PVs are related constructions that show a pragmatic asymmetry with respect to one another.
- The asymmetry is the result of a null pronoun in the ground position of figure retention PVs.
- The presence of a null ground is predicted by an analysis of ground promotion PVs
- The association of the null grounds with a syntactic position suggests they should be analysed with null subjects and topics rather than with the null arguments of radical pro-drop languages.

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