



Null subjects and ellipsis from an idiom perspective

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Sluicing and Ellipsis at 50

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1 Introduction

Clausal idioms undergo pronominalization and ellipsis. Nunberg, Sag & Wasow 1994; Bruening 2015; etc.

We discuss a novel paradigm involving anaphoric relations in clausal idioms in null subject languages.

- This paradigm sheds light on how subjects are not realized in these languages.

Takeaways

- Overt pronouns in pro-drop languages are referential in a way that subjects of clausal idioms are not;
- Languages resort to different kinds of ellipsis – within what is grammatically possible – to avoid overt pronouns in these contexts.

2 What happens when a clausal idiom's predicate is elided?

In languages without null subjects: the subject must be realized as a pronoun. Huang & Mendes 2019

- (1) A: Did *the chickens come home to roost*? [English]
B: Yes, {**they**/ #the chickens} sure did.

Novel generalization for null subject languages

When a clausal idiom's predicate is elided, the idiom's subject cannot be realized overtly at all, not even as a pronoun.

- (2) Brazilian Portuguese
A: *O pau já tinha comido quando você chegou lá?*
the stick already had eaten when you got there
B: {**#Ele**/ #O pau/ \emptyset } tinha, mas ...
he the stick had, but
'Had the stick already eaten when you got there?' 'He had, but ...'
('The stick eats' \approx 'A fight breaks out'; *o pau* is masculine)
- (3) Mandarin Chinese
A: *Wailaide heshang zhende hui nian jing?*
foreign monk really can chant sutra
B: {**#Tamen**/ #Wailaide heshang/ \emptyset } dangran bu hui!
they foreign monk of.course not can
'Can foreign monks really chant sutras?' 'Of course they can't!'
('Foreign monks can chant sutras' \approx 'Things from outside are necessarily better.')

3 A conspiracy against overt idiom subjects

3.1 Why not a full NP?

If the speaker pronounces something that could be elided, the hearer is led to assume that the repeated piece is contrastive. Huang & Mendes 2019

- (4) For English idiom *the shit hit the fan*:
#*The shit didn't* \rightarrow something else *hit the fan*.

No plausible predicates to consider, if *the shit* and *hit the fan* both lack denotations.

3.2 Why not an overt pronoun?

Bi & Jenks (2019): unbound overt pronouns in pro-drop languages denote discourse referents.

- But idiom subjects do not necessarily introduce discourse referents.

- (5) O atual presidente da empresa é da família Silva. No the current president of.the company is of.the family Silva, in.the ano que vem, {**#ele**/ #o presidente/ \emptyset } vai ser da família next year he the president will be of.the family Mendes.
Mendes
'The current president of the company is from the Silva family. Next year, he will be from the Mendes family.' [Brazilian Portuguese]
- (6) Qunian zongtong shi minzhudangren. Jinnian {**#ta**/ #zongtong/ \emptyset } last.year president be Democrat this.year he president shi gonghedangren. be Republican
'Last year, the president was a Democrat. This year, he is a Republican. [Mandarin Chinese]

To avoid a contrastive or referential interpretation, languages must find ways to "hide" the subject. **How?**

4 Two ways to not pronounce a subject

- (7) a. NP (+ VP) ellipsis b. Clausal ellipsis
- CP CP
- C AuxP Aux+C AuxP
- Subj Aux VP Subj *t* VP

In both options in (7):

- Idiom is syntactically present, just unpronounced \rightarrow idiomatic reading. Huang & Mendes 2019; cf. Ross 1969; Lasnik 1999; Merchant 2001, etc.
- Both options are independently motivated.

4.1 Brazilian Portuguese (partial null-subject)

BP example (2) involves polarity focus.

- We assume that these constructions involve verb-raising *clausal ellipsis* (7b). Kato 2016, Holmberg 2016, Mendes 2018

- (8) A: Ninguém lavou a louça. B: Lavou, [alguém—*t* a—louça], sim.
nobody washed the dish washed somebody the dish yes
'Nobody did the dishes.' 'Yes, **someone** did.'

Deriving null pronouns by NP ellipsis in BP (7a) is at odds with two facts:

- Bare arguments are limited in BP. They are typically generic.
- Null subjects in BP matrix clause are limited to topic deletion. Ferreira 2000

- (9) *Comprou o carro.
bought the car
'He bought the car.'

4.2 Mandarin Chinese (null subject)

Popular proposal for East Asian languages: (Some) null pronouns are derived from NP ellipsis (7a). Tomioka 2003, Bi & Jenks 2019

- Echoes proposals to derive overt pronouns from NP ellipsis. Postal 1969, Elbourne 2001, Huang & Mendes 2019

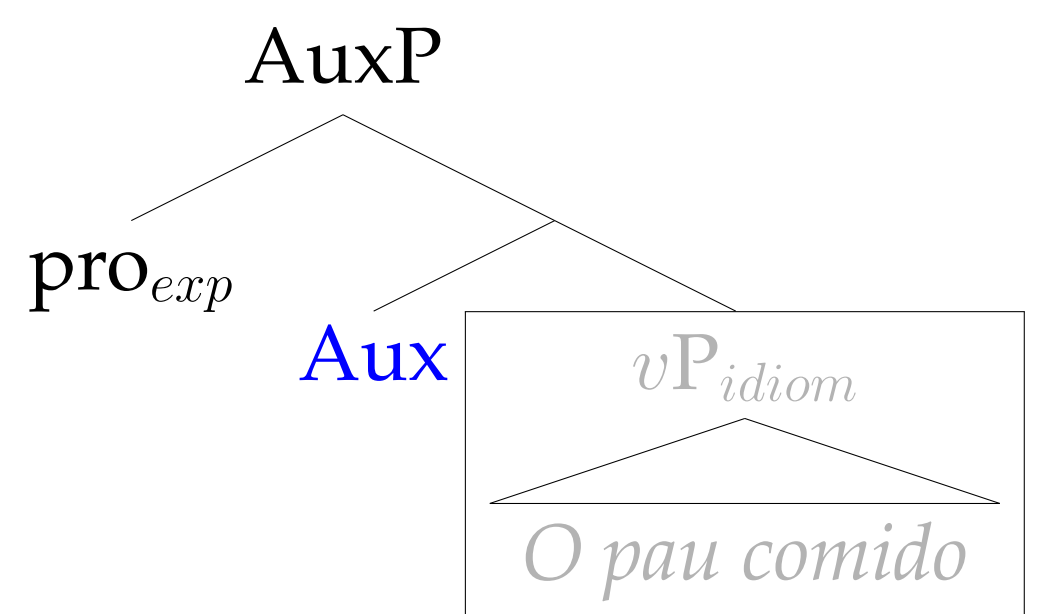
Clausal ellipsis analysis (7b) does not work well for MC:

- Unclear if MC has clausal ellipsis (sluicing) independently. Adams 2004, Song & Yoshida 2017
- MC auxiliaries do not raise.

4.3 Against a null expletive analysis

Assume that clausal idioms are inserted as *v*Ps.

- Wrongly predicts Aux-SVO or VSO in MC and BP.
- Theory-internal problem: Null expletives lack PF and LF content, irrelevant to interfaces. Sheehan 2006



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