The Null-Subject Parameter, Overt Expletives and Zero Subjects in Scandinavian Languages

PRELIMINARIES

- The paper discusses the advantages of a morphosyntactic parametric approach vs a lexicalist approach for the analysis of expletive subjects. It is widely acknowledged that Scandinavian languages split into two groups, as the Null-Subject (macro)parameter is concerned: Island Scandinavian languages (Icelandic, Faroese), where Agreement and Case are strong, lack obligatory expletives [MIS 1990], while Mainland Scandinavian languages (Danish, Norwegian, Swedish), which have obligatory expletives, are described as having weak/no Agreement, cf. [Holmberg & Platzack 1995], [Vikner 1995], [Falk 1993].

- I assume that this perspective is right, but argue that one needs a ternary grouping of Scandinavian language, since both Mainland Scandinavian and Island Scandinavian languages deviate from the Old Norse type.

- More specifically, I claim that Modern Scandinavian overt expletives are not just a visualization of Old Scandinavian ‘silent’ expletives and prove that Modern Island Scandinavian zero subjects and expletives are categories with a different syntactics.

- Finally, I conclude that Scandinavian data did not make necessary such radical means as revision of the Projection Principle, cf. [Babby 2002] or a non-configurational analysis, cf. [Faarlund 1995], [Faarlund 2001].

TERMINOLOGY

- The term ‘zero category’ consistently denotes role-sensitive null categories (i.e. null pronouns with an Agentive semantics etc.), while the term ‘null category’ is used a standard chomskyan sense and refers to a set of covert role-insensitive expressions, some of which may and some may not have morphological case and phi-features.

GENERAL PROBLEMS

- Are role-sensitive and role-insensitive null categories compatible in one and the same model of theoretic grammar? May role-sensitive and role-insensitive null categories coexist in one and the same language?

1. Pro-drop vs non pro-drop vs. semi pro-drop languages.

1a. Old Icelandic, Old Norwegian and other Old Scandinavian idioms are standard pro-drop languages with a non-trivial, though not a unique feature:

- no lexical contrast of ‘personal’ predicates taking standard Nominative subjects (=Specs of agreeing TPs) as their external argument vs ‘impersonal’ predicates taking Oblique subjects (=Specs of non-agreeing TPs) or expletives as their external argument.

Each Old Icelandic predicate capable of taking a Nominative subject, was also capable of projecting a structure without any overt external argument,

- *Helgi-Nom sá-3Sg. skipit-Acc fyrir laufinu* ‘H. saw the ship through the leaves’ ~ *∅-sá-3Sg. ekki skipit-Acc fyrir laufinu* ‘Nobody could see the ship through the leaves’, lit. ‘__ saw not the ship through the leaves’.

---

1 The paper is a part of the research project ‘The typology of free word order languages and the models of inversion’ grant RGNF 06-04-00203a whose financial support is gratefully acknowledged.
This observation holds for verbs from all semantic classes, cf. verbs of action/activity, verbs of dynamic change/process, experiential verbs, statives and modals.

- Despite attempts made in the pregenerative period, it is impossible to rule out puzzling examples like Ø-sá-3Sg. ekki skipit-Acc fyrir laufinu as elliptical structures [Zimmerling 2002]. Faarlund adduces examples of this kind as proof that Old Scandinavian languages were non-configurational [Faarlund 1995]. This conclusion is not necessary.
- A wiser solution is to assume that pairs of sentences like Helgi-Nom sá-3Sg. skipit-Acc fyrir laufinu ~ Ø-sá-3Sg. ekki skipit-Acc fyrir laufinu had the same numeration and to introduce zero subjects into derived structures, cf. [Zimmerling 2007]. This would straightforwardly account for the fact that Old Icelandic does not allow for expletive/tautological subjects even with meteorological verbs: structures like *'IT IS DAWNING’ or *‘THE DAWN IS DAWNING’ do not occur.

Thus, the absence of overt expletives in Old Icelandic is a consequence of a more general Overtness Constraint on the manifestation of an external argument:

(i) In the basic Nominative sentence pattern the subject position has to be filled by a non-zero element in the Nominative Case. In the derived sentence pattern the subject position is filled by a zero element and cannot be filled by any overt sentence material. Each predicate can be used both in the basic and in the derived pattern, without substantial changes in the lexical meaning.

1.2. Modern Danish, Norwegian and Swedish are standard pro-drop languages with obligatory overt expletives. They lack zero subjects, unless the latter are introduced into substandard sentences with dropped postverbal expletives:
- colloquial Danish Her bliver [-Ø] ikke fejet noget ind under tæppet ⇐ Da. Her bliver der-Expl ikke fejet noget ind under tæppet.

This step is not necessary: one can either apply to a silent expletive theory, or simply assume that substandard her in examples of this kind is just a synonym of standard Da. der.

1.3. Modern Icelandic and Faroese can be called semi-pro-drop languages. Overt expletives exist, but are not obligatory. These languages seem to lack predicates that require expletives in all configurations: at least some native speakers of Icelandic accept sentences like Ice. A morgun-Adv Ø-rignir-3Sg því sennilega mikið ~ Ø-rignir-3Sg því sennilega mikið á morgun [MIS 1990: 49]. The same holds for Faroese.

One can certainly claim that Modern Island Scandinavian expletives (Ice. það, Far. Tað) are not external arguments, since they mostly occur preverbally as topicalized elements, but are frequently dropped postverbally. However, such theory-internal claims do not help classifying Modern Island Scandinavian and Old Icelandic in the same group. For the first, one still has to explain, why Modern Island Scandinavian allows for það/tað insertion, while Old Icelandic did not allow for þat insertion. For the second, það/tað insertion is possible only in one subclass of Modern Icelandic/Faroese predicates.

While it goes both to insert an overt tað in the preverbal position with ganga, cf. Far. Vit byrjúða hesa greinina við at siga, [Ø-at tað-Expl göngur-3Sg upp og niður í fiskivinnini-DatPrepSg] or drop it postverbally, cf. Far. Í fiskivinnini-DatPrepSg Ø-göngur-3Sg ___ altíð upp og niður. This operation is not allowed with other predicates. það-insertion is e.g. blocked with such verbs as Ice. lægja ‘calm down’ or slota ‘subside’. Cf. Ice. vindiðnun-AccSg Ø-lFgir-3Sg "the wind drops", but not * það-Expl lFgir vindinn. Ice. veðrini-DatSg Ø-sloðari-3Sg, but not * það-Expl sloðari veðrini.

A meaning like ‘The patient is getting worse’ can be expressed in Modern Icelandic both in a construction with 2nX-insertion, cf. Ice. það-Expl dregur-3Sg stóðug af sjúklingunum-Dat. Prep. lit. ‘It draws constantly from the patient’ as well as in a construction blocking 2nX-insertion, cf. Ice. sjúklingunum-Dat.Sg. Ø-hrákar-3Sg, lit. "to-the-patient gets-worse”. One cannot however alternate these constructions with one and the same predicate, which proves that they are not free variants.

A drawback of the silent expletive analysis is that if we apply it both to the cases of það/tað dropping (in the draga type) and to the cases, where það/tað cannot be inserted (cf. the hraka type), we will get different types of zero expletives in our formalism. In order to avoid this complication, a number of linguists assumed that verbs from the hraka type, which block for það/tað insertion, take oblique subjects in the Accusative (cf. vindinn ‘to the wind’) or Dative Case (cf. veðrini ‘of the weather’). However, an extention of an oblique subject analysis to structures, where a properly governed oblique NP/DP theta-marked as Theme (Patient) is acknowledged as grammatical subject in the active voice, is not desirable, cf. Lavine [Lavine 2005] who argues against this proposal with regard to Slavic languages. Island Scandinavian furnishes another argument against an oblique subject analysis in the hraka/slotha type: verbal and participial patterns with dative NPs/DPs show different role-and-reference properties.
"Ergative": Unintentional Agent/Force, \{-CONTROL\}

"Dative passive": \{± CONTROL\}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ice. Bátnum=DatSg ampions {± CONTROL} hvolft=Sup (viljandi), lit. &quot;the boat was overturned by purpose&quot;.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ice. Bátnum=DatSg ampions {± CONTROL} hvolft=Sup (viljandi), lit. &quot;the boat was overturned by purpose&quot;.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. The case of Russian: role-sensitive zero categories

In Russian, the semantic difference, which Modern Icelandic expresses by opposing verbal and participial patterns, is expressed by two verbal patterns with different zero subjects, cf. the ill-formed Rus. Лодку-Асс \{± CONTROL\} опрокинуло-3SgN.Pst. *умышленно* with the well-formed Rus. лодку-Асс \{± CONTROL\} опрокинуло-3Pl.Pst. (умышленно) [8]. It is reasonable either to introduce two different zero subjects (glossed above as \{± CONTROL\} \{± Non-referential; + Human’ - Agent; - Elements\} for the verbal and participial patterns, respectively, or reserve the notion of oblique subjecthood for Ice. Dative passives only and get rid of \{± CONTROL\}. Whatever decision is made, it is clear that the alleged \{± CONTROL\} subjects of verbal impersonals of the hraka type have distinct role-and-reference properties: they prove to be \{± Agent; -Referential; -Human\}.

Modern Russian has a wide variety of grammatical subjects. Apart from overt nominative subjects which trigger agreement (Specs of agreeing TPs), it has clausal subjects (both CPs and VP-infinitives), oblique subjects (Specs of non-agreeing TPs), semi-expletive pronoun èto ‘it’, ‘this one’ and, finally, case-marked zero subjects in 3Sg. and 3Pl., cf. (Mel’čuk 1995, 180-185). Russian zero subjects are pronouns, which select for nominative case and [+ Sg.] or [+ Pl.] agreement feature. The two zero pronouns have different role and reference properties and are bound to two different sentence patterns, see examples (1) and (2) below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[People] ([Vf.3.Pl]; + intentional action)</th>
<th>[Elements] ([Vf.3.Sg]; -intentional action)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Ulic-u zasypal-% pesk-om. StreetAcc:Sg strewedPret:3Pl sandInstr:Sg</td>
<td>(2) Ulic-u zasypal-% pesk-om streetAcc:Sg strewedPret:3SgN sandInstr:Sg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘[People] strewed the street with sand’.</td>
<td>‘The street got strewed with sand’, lit. ‘[It] strewed the street with sand’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 1: Two types of Russian zero pronouns: \[People\] vz. \[Elements\]

Russian zero subjects control into gerunds and bind anaphors, cf. (Mel’čuk 1995, 185; Zimmerling 2007). They must be classified with “strong” subjects, together with overt nominative subjects.

Anaphoric binding

| (3) V svoëm dome \[People\] obyčno ne gad-\%jat. |
|---|---|
| (4) Piratskimi diskami \[People\] torgu-\%jut v Lužnikah, obespečiva\% vseh moskvičej. IllegalInstr:Pl sellPres:3Pl in LužnikLoc:Pl provideGER all MoscovitesAcc:Pl |
| ‘One usually doesn’t make [it] dirty in one’s [own] house’. | ‘[They] sell illegal CDs in Luzhniki providing all Moscovites [with them]’.

Fig 2: Russian zero pronoun \[People\]: anaphoric binding (3) and control into gerunds (4)

PROPOSAL

Since Ice. \{± CONTROL\}—zeros both display a syntactics and semantics of their own — they block for \{± CONTROL\} insertion and always behave as non-referential non-human Agents, it makes sense to acknowledge them as grammatical subjects, all the more both competing approaches — a silent expletive analysis and an oblique subject analysis — face difficulties. Introducing \{± CONTROL\}—zeros leads to a modification of parameter settings for Island Scandinavian. I conclude with the following proposal:
(ii) Modern Island Scandinavian languages developed a contrast of personal vs. ‘impersonal’ predicates capable of taking zero subjects. The Overtness Constraint does not hold, and overt expletives are no longer banned. The majority of predicates taking overt Nominative subjects in the basic pattern do not project derived structures with a zero element as an external argument.

- This group of predicaties allows for það/ tað insertion. Zero subjects survive in another subclass of predicates, which block for það/ tað insertion.

- Thus, zero subjects and expletives (both overt and silent) have a complementary distribution in Modern Icelandic and Faroese: the first cannot be nominalized, while the latter do not acquire the role-and-reference features of zero subjects, if dropped.

- Contrary to Old Icelandic zeros, Modern Island Scandinavian zero subjects are ‘lexicalized’ in the sense that they are tied up to a given class of predicates. Due to this fact, they acquired a special semantics {+Agent; - Referential; -Human}, which is not characteristic of the Old Icelandic situation, where all predicates irrespective of their lexical semantics could project a derived structure with a zero in the subject position.

References


Мельчук И.А. 1995. Русский язык в модели Смысл ↔ Текст. Москва-Вена: Языки русской культуры, 206 - 211.

