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Aggressive pro-drop and the specificity of the 3rd person in Slavic languages

The paper revises the Null-Subject-Parameter responsible for dropping thematic pronominal subjects of a finite clause and offers a new classification of Slavic languages in terms of pro-drop. I am focusing on two non-trivial facts. A) Some languages including Vojvodina Rusinsky and Old Novgorod developed a constraint blocking BE-auxiliaries in clauses with overt subject pronouns. In this group inflected auxiliaries are licensed by T only in clauses with pro, cf. pro dobri=e and Von dobri ‘He is good’ but not *Von=e dobri where both the 3Sg. auxiliary =e and 3Sg.M. pronoun von are spelled-out. Old Novgorod lacks 3rd person auxiliaries but in 1st-2nd persons it patterns with Rusinsky. I refer to this group as ‘aggressive pro-drop’. B) Some other languages including Russian license pro-drop only in 1st-2nd persons. (Franks 1995:299) claims that Russian is non-pro-drop while (Meyer 2007) assumes the reversed. I prove that 3rd person pro is licensed in Russian only if its antecedent is D-linked. I refer to this option as ‘weak/non-pro-drop’ and argue that it is different from ‘standard pro-drop’ (Polish, Czech). Neither Jaeggli & Safir’s ‘morphological uniformity’ of verbal paradigms nor Müller’s ‘impoverishment/neutralization of φ-features’ criteria predict the contrast of 1st-2nd vs 3rd person pro-drop. Holmberg’s hypothesis that 1st-2nd pronouns can be dropped since they are Ns while 3rd person pronouns cannot since they are Ds is falsified by Russian data.

Historically, aggressive pro-drop results from a combination of two features – 1) pro-drop licensing with non-D-linked referents 2) licensing of zero auxiliaries/copula dropping. Standard pro-drop languages don’t license zero auxiliaries or restrict them to the 3rd person. The weak/non-pro-drop option in the history of Russian resulted from two processes – 1) loss of 3rd person auxiliaries 2) licensing of 1st-2nd auxiliary dropping. Standard pro-drop languages kept the balance between these two extremes by making overt auxiliaries obligatory.

References


Gilligan, Gary M. 1987. A cross-linguistic approach to the pro-drop parameter. Univ. of Southern California PhD.


