Deletion, agreement and focus. How to account for null arguments in Basque?

0. The goal of this paper is to analyse the null argument phenomenon from a minimalist perspective.

1. The Basque puzzle: null arguments without agreement.

1.1. The subject, direct object and indirect object of a clause (ergative, absolutive, dative arguments) can be dropped in Basque

(1) e<sub>ERG</sub> e<sub>ABS</sub> e<sub>DAT</sub> eman d - i - o - t.
give 3Abs.sg - root - 3Dat.sg - 1Erg.sg

“I gave it to him/her/it”

1.2. Basque is traditionally described as a three-way-pro-drop language: its three-way agreement marking (ergative, absolutive, dative) is said to license the three null arguments of the verb in (1) (Laka 1988, Ortiz de Urbina 1989, Salaburu 1987).

1.3. However, as I will discuss, there’s a clear problem for the traditional account: phonologically empty arguments occur in non-finite clauses too (2) (Ortiz de Urbina 1989, Oihartzabal 1991, Zabala & Odriozola 1996, Elordieta 2002), hence (as I demonstrate, on the basis of the (non)occurrence of the Person-Case-Constraint), without any syntactic agreement relation. Null arguments in Basque don’t seem to be licensed by agreement.

(2) e nahi duzu [e<sub>ERG</sub> e<sub>DAT</sub> e<sub>ABS</sub> gaur bertan esa-te]-a?

want Aux today just say-te-Det

“Do you want (me/us/her/him/them) to tell (it/them) to (me/us/you/her/them) today?”

2. Strict ellipsis account. Assuming that ellipsis applies to constituents and that it is “licensed” by a head (Lobeck 1995, Merchant 2001), I show that strict discourse-level ellipsis cannot account for the null argument phenomenon in Basque.

2.1. Nominal ellipsis. It has been claimed for Japanese pros that they are instances of null or ellided NPs (Tomioka 2003, Moriyama & Whitman 2004, Holmberg (to appear)). I show that definite null arguments in Basque are neither DPs with an ellided NP selected by a null D, nor ellided bare NPs. A first, plausible hypothesis is that the null arguments are ellided NPs headed by a null D. I argue that even if such an analysis can be maintained for indefinite null arguments (cf. Giannakidou & Merchant (1997) for Greek) assuming that indefinite/weak quantifiers are base-generated in a position lower than strong quantifiers (cf. Etxeberria 2005), it cannot be maintained for definite null arguments: there is no null definite determiner in Basque (cf. Trask 2003). Then I show that the second hypothesis, the “null bare NP” hypothesis (cf. Tomioka 2003) neither can be maintained: Basque fails to yield the interpretive indeterminacy effect that shows up in Japanese.

2.2. Clausal ellipsis. I also show that null arguments cannot be the consequence of phrasal-ellipsis (e.g. VP or IP) resulting in a fragment without argument DPs (cf. Otani & Whitman (1991) for Japanese). According to this type of analysis, the raising of a verbal complex to a peripheral position licenses the ellipsis of its XP complement if this one is given (in the sense of Merchant 2004), resulting in the deletion of the argument DPs within it. I show however that this cannot be the case: not always are all the arguments of a verb silent. In (3) for instance, the verbal complex is focused and the object DP still is overt.

(3) eman diot janari-a
give AUX food-the

“I GAVE HER food”
It could be argued that these remaining arguments are dislocated DPs (thus in a position above the verbal complex), but I show that this cannot be the case: quantified NPs can have nonspecific/cardinal reading (cf. Cinque 1990) when they appear at the right of the verb (4b), contrarily to real dislocated quantified NPs at the left of the focus position (4a). Thus the object in (4b) is in vP internal position.

(4) a. Liburu asko Peio-ri eman dizkiogu.
   Book many Peio-Dat give AUX
   “We gave many of the books TO PEIO” Proportional reading

b. Peio-ri eman dizkiogu liburu asko.
   Peio-Dat give AUX book many
   “We gave many (of the) books TO PEIO” Proportional and cardinal readings

3. “Licensing” by focus. I analyze the hypothesis that the null arguments in Basque are licensed not by agreement, but by focus.

Miyagawa (2004) proposes a parameterized version of the obligatory EPP feature on T: in a language, the EPP is related to either agreement or focus, which makes the language either agreement-prominent or focus-prominent (cf. also Chomsky 2005). In agreement prominent languages, the occurrence of null subjects is thus to be related to agreement, because subjects are the elements that enter into checking relation with the head bearing the EPP feature. In consequence, the logical conclusion for null arguments in focus-prominent languages is that they are related to focus feature matching.

Let’s assume that Basque is a focus-prominent language (cf. de Rijk 1972, Ortiz de Urbina 1989, Irurtzun 2004 among others): the EPP makes a focused XP raise to some higher position, to the specifier of the head carrying the EPP feature (focus movement). The remaining DPs stay in vP-internal positions. To account for the possibility of deleting these remaining argument DPs, I will assume that deletion processes have to be parallel in both agreement-prominent and focus-prominent languages. With Sigurdsson (2003) and, in a certain way, with Speas ([1995] to appear), I will assume that in agreement-prominent languages, subject DP or AGR is sufficient to express φ-values (and DPs can get deleted under certain conditions), that there is no redundant information. I will thus propose that in the case of focus-prominent languages, the expression of focus (in Basque, by adjacency between the focalized phrase and the verbal complex, and maybe by additional dislocation of other DPs) is sufficient to express the informational structure of the clause and can drive to the deletion of the arguments remained in the vP. That could be understood as a way of extreme deaccenting (cf. Tancredi (1992) or Schwarzschild (1999)).

Selected references